

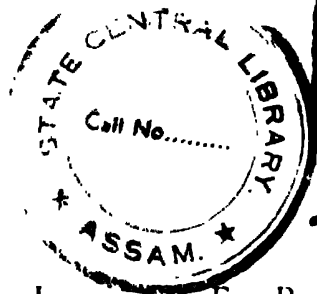




ДОРОГОЙ
МОЙ
ЧЕЛОВЕК

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Y U R I G E R M A N

THE STAUNCH AND THE TRUE

PART TWO

**of
The Cause
You Serve**

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Юрий Герман
«ДОРОГОЙ МОЙ ЧЕЛОВЕК»
На английском языке

THE STORY SO FAR

Volodya Ustimenko's mother died when he was a baby, and his father, a pilot, was killed in action over Madrid. He grew up in the care of his father's sister, Aglaya Petrovna Ustimenko, a good and beautiful woman. A sensitive, serious boy he was brought up to be upright and uncompromising to a fault, and with the years he developed a harsh, intolerant attitude towards all manner of self-seekers and shirkers. He held that every person should have a cause to serve in life, and devote himself body and soul to his lifework, which in his case was medicine. He studied at the Sechenov Medical College under Professors Polunin, Gamchev and Dr. Postnikov, who saw in him the makings of a great surgeon. There was one other professor at the institute, Dr. Zhovtyak, a careerist.

Since childhood, Volodya's best friend and constant companion was Varva Stepanova who adored him, looked up to him, and was willing to subjugate her interests to his. She realised that although Volodya loved her, his principles and the cause he served would always come first with him, and accepted the fact.

Varya was the daughter of Rodion Mefodyevich Stepanov, Volodya's father's best friend. Rodion began life as a rating on the legendary *Aurora* and after the Revolution was sent to the Naval Academy. In Petrograd in 1919 he married Alevtina Andreyevna, former parlourmaid of a Mr. and Mrs. Gogolev. Gogolev, a barrister and a counter-revolutionary, fled abroad. Alevtina had the mentality of a Philistine, her highest ambition being to live the life of her former mistress, a lady of leisure, with plenty of money, gorgeous clothes and servants of her own. Before she married Rodion, Alevtina had a son, Yevgeny, whose father she never saw again. She loved and pampered the boy much more than she did her little girl Varya, who was Rodion's daughter all over. The marriage was a failure from the start, and finally Alevtina divorced Rodion to marry a worthless character.

Yevgeny went to the Medical College with Volodya. He was shrewd, and ambitious, with always an eye on the main chance. Rather than practise medicine he made a career for himself as a health department executive.

Volodya did his intern year at the Chorny Yar hospital under Bogoslovsky, a brilliant surgeon who had all the endearing qualities of a "country doctor". Later Volodya went on an assignment to a country in Asia where he set up a hospital, helped to fight an outbreak of plague and gradually won the devotion and respect of the local population.

Before leaving home Volodya had a misunderstanding with Varya. She wanted to become an actress, and he accused her of flightiness, of succumbing to the influence of her brother Yevgeny and his crowd, and of seeking an easy life. The rift between them widened, his bitterness aggravated by his homesickness, loneliness and his injured pride, which prevented him from writing to Varya of the hardships and difficulties he was encountering in his job abroad.

The end of Book One finds Volodya returning to the Soviet Union to do his share in the war effort.

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"I cannot praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue, unexercised and unbreathed, that never sallies out and sees her adversary, but slinks out of the race where that immortal garland is to be run for, not without dust and heat."

John Milton

"A cause will only be served faithfully if he who is devoted to this cause knows how to fight for it. . ."

Johann Wolfgang Goethe



Chapter 1

On the Westbound Train

The Moscow express pulled out slowly, as befitted a train of its class. The two foreign diplomats in the dining car at once pushed aside the short silk window curtains and looked out. Volodya Ustimenko took a good look at them. They were both short, athletic, wiry men. They looked arrogant in their dinner jackets, with their rimless spectacles, short cigars and finger rings. They took no notice of Volodya but gazed searchingly across the infinite steppe, silent under a full moon riding high in a black autumn sky. What did they expect to see now they had crossed the border? Fires? War? German tanks?

It was the dinner hour. In the kitchen behind Volodya's back the cooks could be heard at work and there was a tantalising smell of frying onions. The stewardess came in with a trayful of Russian beer in frosted bottles. At the next table sat a paunchy Amer-

ican journalist peeling an orange with pudgy fingers while voicing military "forecasts" to which the two diplomats, as alike as twins, listened with an air of deference.

"The son of a bitch!" said Volodya.

"What is he saying?" asked Tod-Jin.

"The son of a bitch!" Volodya repeated. "The fascist!"

The diplomats nodded vigorously and smiled. The famous American journalist had cracked a joke.

"I've already cabled that one off to my paper," he told them, and flicked a segment of orange into his mouth. It was a huge mouth, like a frog's, a slit from ear to ear. The three were enjoying themselves. By the time they got to the brandy they had become quite gay.

"Calm down! Try and keep calm," Tod-Jin said looking compassionately at Volodya. "You must keep control of yourself."

A waiter came up to Volodya and Tod-Jin at last, and highly recommended the sturgeon "*à la monastère*" and the lamb chops. While Volodya studied the menu, he stood waiting with glossy head inclined, evidently taking Tod-Jin, with his stern and immobile face, for some rich and important guest from the East.

"Bœuf *à la Stroganoff* and a bottle of beer for me," said Volodya.

"And I'll have buckwheat porridge and tea," said Tod-Jin.

"Oh, no, Tod-Jin!" Volodya objected vehemently. "I've lots of money, you know."

"Buckwheat porridge and tea," Tod-Jin repeated stiffly.

The waiter raised his eyebrows, made a mournful face and retired. The American journalist poured some brandy into his mineral water, rinsed his mouth with it, and then filled his pipe with black tobacco.

Another gentleman had joined the three. He might have come straight from one of the works of Charles Dickens—he was lopped and bleary-eyed, with a duckbill of a nose and a small pursed mouth like a chicken's behind. It was to this checked and striped creature, that the journalist had made the observation that had caused Volodya's blood to boil.

"Don't," begged Tod-Jin, clasping Volodya's wrist with his cool hand. "It's no use, no."

Volodya did not hear Tod-Jin, or rather he heard but was past prudence. He leapt to his feet—a tall, lithe figure in his old black sweater—glared at the journalist and yelled across the car, in his awful, blood-chilling, self-taught English.

"Hey, you, there! Yes you, it's you I mean. . . ."

Bewilderment flashed across the journalist's flat, beefy face, the diplomats became politely arrogant, and the Dickensian gentleman drew back slightly.

"My country has extended its hospitality to you," Volodya shouted. "I am a citizen of this country and proud of it. Cut out your disgusting, cynical and shabby remarks about the great battle our people are fighting! If you don't I'll throw you to hell out of this car. . . ."

That is roughly what Volodya thought he said. Actually, he had been much less articulate, but it was obvious from the way the journalist's jaw sagged for a moment, revealing the small, fish-like teeth in his frog's mouth, that he had understood him perfectly. But he pulled himself together quickly—he was not the sort to flounder in such a situation.

"Bravo!" he called out, making the motions of clapping. "Bravo, my eager young friend! I'm glad I was able to stir you up. We've covered less than a hundred kilometres from the border, and I've good copy already. I'll begin my cable like this: Your old Pete almost got thrown off a fast-moving train for simply cracking a little joke about the Russians' fighting efficiency. O. K. with you, my hot-tempered friend?"

Volodya was nonplussed.

Should he take no notice and get down to his *bœuf à la Stroganoff*?

Volodya sat down and began to eat. But the journalist would not leave him alone: he moved over to his table and asked him who he was, what he did, where he was going, and why he was coming back to Russia.

"Oh, fine, a missionary doctor going home to fight under the banner. . . ." he said, jotting things down.

"Look here!" Volodya cried. "Missionaries are priests, and I'm. . . ."

"You can't fool old Pete," the journalist said, puffing at his pipe. "Old Pete knows his reader. Here, show me your muscles, I want to see if you could really have thrown me out."

Volodya had to comply. After that old Pete showed him his muscles and asked Volodya and his friend "the Oriental Byron" to have some brandy with him.

Tod-Jin finished his porridge, gulped down his weak tea and left. Volodya, stuck with old Pete much longer, was self-consciously aware of the mocking glances of the two diplomats

and the striped Dickensian person, and cursed himself roundly for making that stupid scene.

"What was it like?" Tod-Jin asked gravely when Volodya returned to their compartment.

"They are always more cunning than we are," Tod-Jin said sadly, lighting a cigarette after hearing Volodya's account. "Yes, doctor. I was no more than so high," he held out his hand, palm down, about three feet from the floor. "I was just so high, and people like old Pete, yes, they were like him, they gave us sweets. They did not beat us, no, they gave us sweets. But my mother, she did beat me, because she was too tired and too ill to live. And I wanted to leave her, and go to one of the old Petes and get sweets from him always. They gave sweets to the grownups too—that is, alcohol. And for that we brought them pelts and gold, yes, yes, and then came death. . . . The old Petes are very, very clever. . . ."

Volodya sighed.

"I made a stupid mess of things, I know. And now he'll write me up as a priest, or monk or something. . . ."

He swung himself up onto the upper berth, stripped down to his shorts, lay down between the cool, crisp sheets and switched on the radio. It was almost time for the Sovinformburo broadcast. Folding his hands behind his head, he lay still—waiting. Tod-Jin stood looking out of the window at the endless moonlit steppe. At last, Moscow came on the air. Kiev had fallen, the announcer said.

Volodya turned to face the wall, and pulled the blanket up over the sheet. The beefy face of the man who called himself old Pete kept appearing before him. He shut his eyes tight to drive the repulsive vision away.

"Never mind," Tod-Jin said in a gruff voice. "The U.S.S.R. will win. There's more trouble to come, but later on everything will be fine. After night comes morning. I heard their radio: Adolf Hitler will surround Moscow. They'll let no Russian escape from the city. And then they will flood Moscow with water. He's got everything worked out. Moscow is to become a sea, and the capital of the Land of Communism to be wiped out forever. As I listened I thought: I studied in Moscow, I've got to be there, in the city they want to flood. I can hit a hawk in the eye with my rifle. That is needed now. I can shoot a sable in the eye, too. I explained it to the Central Committee the way I'm telling you now, comrade doctor. I said to them—

Communists bring light, and if they are no more eternal night will fall. And for our people it would be forever, yes. And I'm going to Moscow for the second time. I'm not afraid of anything, not of the fiercest cold, and I can do anything in war. . . ." After a moment of silence he asked: "They can't refuse me, can they?"

"They won't refuse you, Tod-Jin," Volodya replied softly.

He closed his eyes.

And suddenly he saw the caravan moving off. And there was old Abatai running beside Volodya's horse. The westbound express roared on, the engine emitted a drawn-out, powerful wail every now and again, but around Volodya there were horses raising clouds of dust, and a growing crowd of people. Strangely, there was Varya riding beside him on a small long-maned horse. She was patting its neck with her broad palm, the dust-laden wind of Khara tousled her soft hair, and there was the girl Tush, crying and stretching her thin arms towards him. Friends and people he only knew by sight offered him gifts of sour cheese which he was known to like.

"Take this cheese! Take it, you'll eat it at the war, and your wife will share our cheese with you. . . ."

"Yes, I will!" Varya nodded. "I'll share it with him."

"Take this bag of dried curds!" people shouted. "It won't go bad. And your wife will share it with you!"

"Take it, don't be silly," Varya told him. "It's jolly good stuff, you know."

"Take this reindeer cheese, take it, Doctor Volodya! Don't you remember me? You saved my life a long time ago, when we were still afraid of your hospital."

"Do try to recognise him, Volodya," Varya said to him. "It's embarrassing, honestly! Oh, Volodya! Your absent-mindedness will drive me crazy!"

Their horses walked side by side. Varya looked at him with her eyes wide open to meet his. The dust was getting thicker and thicker, and through the veil of dust he spoke to her, and she listened; he told her how he saved Khara from Black Death, how brave and kind he tried to be, even though he was bad-tempered sometimes, how lonely and frightened he had been, how he missed her love always, her presence, her broad, warm and faithful hands, her eyes, herself, all that he had forfeited without realising then how awful and irrevocable the loss would be. But she was with him now, beside him, and on riding out of Khara it was

with her that he saw Lamsy's father with his mounted hunters on a rise. There were about fifty of them, and they all held rifles across their knees. They fired twice in Volodya's and Varya's honour, and then their splendid little, long-maned horses galloped away to bring word to the nomad camps far ahead that they should make ready to see the Soviet doctor off on his way home.

"Gosh, you *are* something, Volodya!" Varya said repeatedly in wonder. "Gosh, Volodya!"

At the nomad camps they rode through, he peered into the faces in an effort—vain in most cases—to remember which of them had been to the dispensary for treatment, which he had examined in their yurtas, which had been put into the hospital, and which he had operated on. But he was unable to tell Varya anything about any of them. They were all smiling now, but when he knew them they had been in pain. They all looked sunburnt and fit now, but they had looked pale and sickly then. Now they were holding back their horses with sure hands, but then they had either been lying in bed, or on stretchers, or leaning on their friends. . . .

"You honestly can't remember now whose life you saved?" Varya asked, looking earnestly into his eyes. "I'd never forget, I'd remember every one of them. . . ."

They were still riding side by side.

And then Volodya lost her. He lost her suddenly, completely, forever. Gone were her hands, her wide-open eyes, her hair that the wind had tousled. There was nothing left, nothing but grief, impossible, unendurable grief.

"Now, now," said Tod-Jin, placing his hand on Volodya's bare shoulder. "Screaming does no good, comrade, quiet, quiet. After the night comes morning, yes."

In the light of the blue lamp above Volodya's head, Tod-Jin's face, furrowed with premature lines, looked like the face of an old, old man. A wise and stern old man.

"Yes, yes," Tod-Jin repeated in a whisper.

"What did I do? Scream?" Volodya asked warily.

"Yes," Tod-Jin replied, settling down on his lower berth.

"Just what did I scream?"

"A Russian name. You called out a Russian name."

"What name?" Volodya asked, leaning over the edge of his berth, ashamed of himself for asking. "What name, Tod-Jin?"

Why was he so insistent? Did he simply want to hear that name once more?

"Varya." Tod-Jin said. "You called out Varya, comrade doctor. You were calling her, yes. . . ."

"Yes, yes!" Volodya thought, clenching his teeth. "It's nothing to you, but what about me? How am I to live now?"

Troubles, Encounters and Memories

The small lorry jolted viciously, and the driver gave Volodya a spiteful look.

"Sit tight, passenger," he said. "It's a military road now, you might land in trouble earlier than you expect."

What trouble? This robust, broad-shouldered chap in the worn leather jacket was talking in riddles all the time.

Borisovo was behind them now. They met a slowly moving, grim procession of lorries headed east, carrying machine tools, tired and stern-faced men in padded jackets, raincoats, or belted civilian overcoats, sleepy children, and frightened old men and women. And Glinishchi was already ablaze with fire from the very bridge to the Krasnogvardeyets state farm, famed throughout the region. No one was trying to put out the fires. There was no one about in this usually busy and noisy large village. The only people in sight were some women digging trenches beyond the level crossing, and several soldiers in sweat-stained tunics unloading queer-looking pyramidal grey blocks from lorries, levering them up with crowbars and pushing them to the side of the road.

"What on earth are they doing?" Volodya asked.

"Ha! He doesn't know!" snapped the driver, making no effort to conceal his malice. "He's never laid eyes on such things before! Don't act so innocent, passenger. What a laugh—he doesn't know what concrete blocks are! He doesn't know what hedgehogs are! Maybe you don't know what a trench is? Do you know that there's a war on? Or haven't you heard? It's the so-called brown plague broken out on us. Only we'll squash all those vermin dead, you can tell them so back there!"

"Back where?" Volodya asked, puzzled.

"Tell it to those friends of yours abroad, where you've just come from."

Volodya grinned perplexedly. Why the devil did he have to go and tell this vigilant bloke about his foreign-visaed pas-

sport and the trouble it had been causing him the last two days. Even the sweater he wore roused suspicion. There was something about the cut of his raincoat; his haircut was different, and he smoked cigarettes of a foreign brand.

"Naturally, in view of the non-aggression pact, we couldn't mobilise right away, but don't you worry, the fascist Fritzes will be finished here all the same," the driver said for Volodya's edification. "The Uncha's as far as you'll get!"

"I'll smash your face in, I'm warning you!" Volodya shouted, feeling terribly insulted all at once. "Then you'll know. . . ."

The driver lifted his left hand to show Volodya the heavy spanner he was gripping. Evidently he had been keeping it handy all the time.

"I'm ready for you," he said, turning the wheel unnecessarily. "Sit nice and quiet, passenger, or I'll break your skull open." "How stupid!" Volodya shrugged.

The whole thing was indeed stupid. It was as stupid as the mess he got into with old Pete on the train.

"The right people at the right place will decide if it's stupid or not," the driver said, after some thought. "So sit tight, passenger, and don't yap, don't get on my nerves."

Smoke hung low and thick over the town. It was so thick that not even the factory smokestacks were visible—not the Krasny Proletary's nor the brick works', nor the cement works', nor the Marxist's. The domes of the cathedral were also veiled in smoke.

At the Control Post at the entrance into the town, the driver showed his pass, and made no bones about what he thought of Volodya.

"He's a spy and a wrecker. Take him off my hands, pals, I bet he's got all kinds of weapons on him and all I've got is a spanner. Take my evidence down quickly because I'm due at the enlistment office at 14:00."

The young lieutenant, in a dither because of the emergency he had to deal with, took a long time to examine Volodya's passport. He studied the entrance visa and all the other stamps, but was none the wiser.

"What is the purpose of your coming here?" he asked.

"I was born here, finished school and the medical institute here, and was registered at the Uncha district registration and enlistment office. I'm a surgeon, understand? And a reservist. . . ."

From the other side of the plywood partition came the driver's excited voice.

"He's been dropped with a parachute, it's as clear as clear. Just take a good look at his haircut. The neck hasn't been shaved at all. And the smell too, if you sniff hard. Is that our lotion?"

"Look here," Volodya said, smiling now. "Suppose I am a spy, why should I have a visaed passport for travelling abroad? Surely, the nazis aren't such fools. . . ."

"None of your fascist propaganda here!" the lieutenant said angrily. "Telling us they're clever! Next thing. . . ."

He was still leafing through the passport. And then, rivetting Volodya with his boyishly keen eyes, he asked suddenly: "Name?"

"Ustimenko," Volodya replied as quickly.

"Your former address? Name the streets you know in the town. Name the friends you had. What institute did you graduate from?"

The dear boy! Fancying himself a wonderful, sharp criminal investigator! But how this youth with the snub nose and the two lieutenant's bars, red cheeks sweating from excitement and thrilled beyond measure by the capture of a real, shrewd and dangerous spy, reminded Volodya of doctor Vasya!

"What's more, he had the cheek to ask why Glinishchi was on fire," came from behind the partition. "He doesn't know, the sweet innocent. . . ."

There's no telling how much longer this would have gone on, if Volodya's old, angry science teacher, Adam Yegorovich, had not walked unexpectedly into the room where the questioning was taking place. But this was no longer the elderly teacher in a shabby suit that Volodya remembered: this was a real officer, a regular soldier, in a smartly fitting tunic, with a shoulder-belt, and a pistol in a holster at his side.

"Good-morning, Ustimenko," he said in his dryish level school-room voice, as though no time at all had passed since Volodya's schooldays and now. "Are you the dangerous spy?"

"Yes, it's me," Volodya said, getting up from force of habit, and feeling like a schoolboy again. "You see I've a passport for travelling abroad. . . ."

Adam held out his hand for Volodya's passport—and the gesture was exactly the same as when he used to take up their science exam papers—leafed through it, and handed it back with a sigh.

"The way time flies, it's the very devil. Incidentally, I didn't think you'd make a general practitioner."

"I'm not a general practitioner, I'm a surgeon," Volodya replied, feeling somehow elated because old Adam had such a manly look. "And I didn't know you were an officer..."

Adam smiled and sighed.

"We never know one another properly," he said in the tone he had used to explain the meaning of large and small calories. "We're always hurrying and scurrying, and suddenly there's one of your boys back from abroad, a man of experience..."

Putting his arm round Volodya's shoulders, he walked with him out of the low-ceilinged barracks, telling them to call the vigilant driver. The man reluctantly put his spanner away under the seat and started cranking up the motor of his lorry. Adam spoke to Volodya with a strange gentleness in his voice.

"Well, good-bye, Ustinenko. This war won't be a short one, it is unlikely that we'll meet again. I'm sorry you didn't study your science harder, I'm not a bad teacher, and the rudiments we teach you in school would have helped you a lot. Pity your attitude to the school in general was so disdainful."

"I know!" Volodya replied with sincere readiness. "I understand everything now, but it's a bit late. And languages, too. You can't imagine what a struggle I had with my English out there. Studying nights, with no one to correct me..."

"Splendid, splendid," Adam interrupted him, "very good. We're all of us geniuses when we're young, and after that we're simply workers. And that's not bad, really. Good-bye!"

Volodya got in beside the driver again and slammed the door. The Red Armyman raised the barrier for them to pass.

"Got a cigarette?" the driver asked in a friendly tone.

"Foreign spy brand only," Volodya replied.

"Oh, forget it, brother," the driver said pacifyingly. "Try to see my side of it. Take your haircut..."

"He's off again..."

"Have it cut differently," the driver advised him. "Our boys keep their eyes open for such things. And ditch your raincoat, it's stylish alright, but ditch it all the same..."

Ustinenko was not listening. Tanks were coming from the opposite direction. They were not many, they were moving slowly, and by their look Volodya understood what hell they had been through. One of them kept swinging to the right, and it was strangely crusted with something, as though burnt. The tank behind it had the armour plating ripped, and another one had to be towed along.

"They've had it bad, poor chaps," said the driver. "That's what I am myself."

"What, a tankman?"

"Sure. I've just got to hand in this truck, collect my mess tin and spoon and then I'll kiss the girls good-bye!"

"Drop me at Radishchev's monument, will you, if it's on your way," Volodya asked.

"Okay."

When the driver had let him out, Volodya felt suddenly frightened. Had Aunt Aglaya survived the bombings? Was the house that once seemed so big still there?

The house was there, and so was the rowan tree in front of the window where on that windy day he had kissed Varya. Did all that really happen?

"You must tell me of your love properly," Varya had said to him gravely. "You're not a bad person, you're good, rather, in your spare time, of course."

And now there was no Varya.

The door was closed, the plaster on the landing had crumbled, the wall had cracked during one of the bombing raids probably, and outside the paneless window the rowan tree swayed in the wind. Hello there, good old rowan tree! Tell me, was there ever anything, or had there always been only the wailing of sirens and the firing of anti-aircraft guns?

Volodya knocked on the door of the flat next to theirs. They did not know the whereabouts of his Aunt Aglaya. Someone had seen her somewhere some time, but no one could tell him anything definite. They would not even let Volodya inside the front door—they had only just moved in, they didn't know anyone there. . . .

With a nostalgic ache in his heart, Volodya walked around the house once again, stroked the smooth and living trunk of the rowan tree with his palm, and walked away. He was in Market Square when a raid began. The Junkers wailed as they dived, probably mistaking the old market place for a military objective. Or was the cathedral their check point perhaps? Covered with sweat, dust and whitewash, Volodya reached the enlistment office at last, but found it closed. The enemy planes had gone away, smoke hung over the town again, soot was settling on everything. The anti-aircraft guns were quiet. The knapsack straps hurt his shoulders, so he sat down on some steps by a porch for a moment. Then it dawned on him that it was here, at the back

of this very yard that Polunin used to live. And suddenly he felt an irresistible urge to see the house again, to go into Polunin's study and perhaps see there the old yellow Ericsson telephone on which he had called Varya's number that night, six-three-seven. . . .

Dragging his knapsack along the ground, he walked across the yard with heavy steps and stopped at an open window.

"Do the Polunins live here?"

A woman appeared in the window at once, a youngish, big woman.

"What do you want?" she demanded, looking Volodya up and down through narrowed eyes.

"Nothing, really," Volodya said, somewhat shaken by the sound of that familiar, mocking and imperious voice. "You see, I was once a pupil of Prov Yakovlevich's or rather I'm a follower of his now, and I wanted. . . ."

"Well then, come on in!" the woman said.

He wiped his feet on the door mat and walked timidly in.

"I've never seen you, but I remember perfectly how you explained from the other room where the tea and sweets were, and how you said to Prov Yakovlevich that he'd been keeping you from your sleep for twenty-two years," Volodya said, wondering why he remembered it all so well.

Polunin's widow closed her eyes for a second, her face becoming masklike, but the next moment she tossed her head, as if driving away the memories Volodya had awakened, and, with a quick, genial smile shook his hand and led him into the room with the enormous collection of books ranged on shelves. It was here that he had stood that night beside Polunin's desk and listened to the story of the famous card-index. Nothing had changed in the room, it even smelled the same—of books, medicine and the terribly strong tobacco with which Polunin rolled his cigarettes.

"Sit down," said Polunin's widow. "You look all in. Shall I make some coffee? Oh yes, my name is Yelena Nikolayevna. And what's yours?"

"I'm Ustimenko."

"No name or patronymic?"

"Vladimir Afanasyevich," Volodya said, reddening. "Only Prov Yakovlevich never called me that."

She looked at him with a smile. She had big, scintillating light-grey eyes, and when she smiled they lit up her pale face with the

too-large mouth and made her beautiful. When in repose, with her slim brows drawn, she looked plain, even unpleasant, hard and mocking.

"There are two of her," Volodya thought quickly. "He fell in love with her when she was smiling, and then there was no escape."

The knowledge gave him a creepy feeling as if he had found out the deceased Polunin's carefully guarded secret, and cursing himself for trespassing he chased away the thought.

The coffee came at once, as if Yelena Nikolayevna had made it expecting Volodya to come. He gulped down a large cup of it, loving it and burning his throat, and asked for more.

"I know why you came," she said, looking hard at him. "In a hurry, too, with a knapsack and everything."

"You do?" he asked, surprised.

"You'd rather not admit it?"

"I honestly don't know what you mean," he said sincerely and a bit more loudly than necessary. "I was simply walking past after the raid..."

"And I suppose you don't know that Prov Yakovlevich kept notes about all his students? You didn't know that? And it's not the reason for your coming here?"

"Certainly not!" Volodya protested vehemently now. "I give you my word of honour that I know nothing about it."

"You don't know and you don't want to know, yes?" she said with a quick, nasty smile, putting her cup down on the tray. "Is that it?"

"No, I would like to know about it, naturally," Volodya said, telling himself to keep calm. "But it doesn't matter. There's only one thing I'd like to ask you: is the card-index still here and, how shall I put it, unemployed? Hasn't it interested anyone? I know something about the system Prov Yakovlevich used in collecting data, and it seems incredible that it has all been kept intact. Or perhaps you didn't want to give it into anyone else's hands?"

"What hands?" she asked coldly. "The only hands we have here are those of Professor Zhovtyak. He did show an interest in the card-index and had a good look through it. He 'studied' it for a long time, to use his expression. He disapproved of the records and the card-index. So much so, in fact, that—it has come to my knowledge—he made a statement in some high

place to the effect that had he known how Professor Polunin spent his 'leisure hours' he would have made short work of that 'so-called professor' . . ."

"In what sense?"

"In the sense that Professor Zhovtyak qualified Polunin's record as a collection of vile, immoral and entirely negative anecdotes about the history of science, capable only of dissuading Soviet students from serving humanity. . . ."

"Oh well, Zhovtyak's always been a swine," Volodya said, neither surprised nor angry. "But then he doesn't make all the decisions. Ganichev, for example. . . ."

"Ganichev is no example," Yelena Nikolayevna broke in. "Not Ganichev! He stuck to Prov at first, and then he weakened quickly. Prov foresaw it, and actually put it down in his notes. Besides, he is ill, very ill. . . ."

An air-raid siren began to wail, and then the anti-aircraft guns on the right bank of the Uncha went into action with a tearing, ringing sound.

"Aren't you thinking of going away?" Volodya asked.

"I am, but it's difficult just now. Practically impossible. . . ." Intercepting Volodya's glance at the bookshelves and card-index boxes, which Polunin called "coffins", she said grimly: "I'll burn this. All this is the seething of his thoughts, the impasses to which he came, all the pang of conscience. . . ."

Her phrasing was somewhat elaborate, but spoken in her deep voice the words rang with such sincerity that Volodya hardly noticed it.

"Why couldn't he compile textbooks instead," she added nostalgically. "He had so many offers, so many requests. He'd laugh and say: 'They think this business is as simple as compiling a cookery book.' But textbooks are written by people far less brilliant than Prov. Textbooks are needed, and if I were the widow of an author of textbooks, I'd. . . ."

She broke off, embarrassed by Volodya's stony stare. But he hardly heard what she said, he was so preoccupied with the thought that Polunin's records must not perish.

He said suddenly in his abrupt, resolute way: "We'll bury it in the yard. It mustn't be burnt. What if we are at war? It will go on for a year or two at most. There's a small garden or something behind your house, that's where we'll bury it."

"I can't dig, I've a rotten heart," she said sharply.

"I'll manage by myself, only what shall we put it in?"

Without asking leave, he went through the rooms where suitcases were packed ready for departure, and found a large zinc clothes boiler with a close-fitting lid and two twin tubs. He waited till dusk, then chose a good spot in the flower garden, spat on his hands and began to dig a sort of trench. Guns boomed beyond the river; hot ash from the burning houses in the town drifted down to the Uncha; more and more nazi bombers came over with a fitful, frightening zooming across the darkening sky. Oil tanks exploded at the railway junction, but Volodya still dug on, cursing himself for his want of skill, his clumsiness, and his maidenish lack of endurance. Finally, when night fell and with it silence, the grave for Polunin's card-index was ready, and the coffin, or rather the two tubs containing the clothes boiler, was lowered. Yelena Nikolayevna stood beside Volodya, weeping softly as if it were indeed a funeral, until he had levelled the ground, and heaped it with broken brick, rusted roofing iron and window glass blasted during the bombings. The grave now looked like a rubbish-heap.

"That's that," Volodya said, straightening up. "I'll say good-bye now."

"Won't you have something to eat?" she invited him rather half-heartedly.

He was terribly hungry and it was crazy venturing out at this hour with a foreign-issued passport like his, but still he went. He knew all the two-way courts and alleyways from here to Krasivaya Street, to Varya's house, and if he went that way no patrol would see him. Hoisting his knapsack on his shoulder, he started off, wondering sadly what Polunin would have said if he were to know that his card-index was to have been burnt and his wife would prefer to have been the widow of an author of textbooks.

And then suddenly he was sorry he did not find out what his teacher had thought of him. But it did not seem important now, it did not matter, it was trifling and vain. . . .

The Magnificent Dr. Tsvetkov

"Hurling and hurling 'em down!" said Old Mefody, Varya's grandfather. "Big-hearted with the bombs, they are."

His little eyes were sharp and accusing. Volodya squirmed under this look as if he were guilty of letting the Germans reach

the right bank of the Uncha. As if it were his fault that nazi tanks had broken into Chorny Yar.

"Go ahead and eat, it's all right," the old man said with a sigh. "I've lots of this canned bream in tomato sauce, can't take it to Kamenka anyway. Better to let our bellies burst with it, than leave it to the Germans."

The house trembled again and again. The old man shook his head and said:

"They're fighting it rich. They're not short of anything, people say. I've even heard tell that they make benzine out of their piss, begging your pardon, distilling it in moonshine stills. That's how far they've gone with their learning. I s'pose those nazis sit in their houses, straining themselves, and then they pour it into cans and deliver it to their government. Is that right, Volodya?"

"What utter rot!" Volodya said angrily.

"Shall we have another drink? This here champagne was given me by a military comrade. He threw it to me from his jeep and said: 'Granddad, take it, it's nourishing.' Shall we?"

The cork shot up to the ceiling. Mefody sighed.

"Nothing in it. It's like weak kvas. Now, why does the label say it's medium dry? Tell me that!" the old man was fast getting fuddled, and Volodya felt bored. He could not leave until morning, so he had to stand it, listen and nod. But he was sorry for the old man. How was he to live in Kamenka? And how could they have left him here? Did they forget to take him along or what?

"I won't stay here another day. I'm not going to live under the Germans. I won't give in to the bastards. That's what Aglaya said too: go to Kamenka, grandfather dear, that's what she said...."

"But where is Aglaya herself?" Volodya asked.

"They don't report their doings to me," Mefody snapped, not without bitterness. "I'm too old to be herded; I say thank you when they tell me, but it's don't be so nosey, old toadstool, if I try to ask them myself. Sometimes they just don't hear me, and at other times they curse me for butting in. Things are the same now as when I was a batman: hand me the glass, you fool, put it down, get out!"

"Oh, Granddad!"

"It's true, too...." he listened for a moment and said: "All quiet. The fascists have gone to sleep. They've got strict regula-

tions for everything, people say, so many hours for war, so many for a lull."

The light in the paraffin lamp began to flicker. This alarmed the old man.

"Quick, let's bed down. I've no more paraffin."

Talking was easier in the dark. Volodya, lying on Varva's couch, either asked about her casually, as it were, or talked in such a way that the old man simply had to mention her, and it was both delightful and painful. But her grandfather did not know much and his story was lame and muddled.

"Well, Boris Gubin stopped coming. Varva blows hot and cold, you know. One day she'd be nice to him, and the next day she'd kick him out. She went back to her actress business, but then she changed her mind. 'It's no good, Granddad,' she says. 'The job's too big for me.' But which job, only God knows. Well, she cried a lot of course, but there's no telling why. All dressed up she was, so fair-haired and pretty. . . ."

It was not what Volodya wanted to hear at all, and the old man knew that he was saying the wrong things in the wrong way, but he could not quite understand how the boy felt, and so he just lay grunting and scratching his sides in the stuffy darkness.

"I bet you didn't waste your time in those foreign lands!" he suddenly burst out angrily.

"What do you mean?"

"Yevgeny's heard all about you, that boy's a smart one, he knows what's what. . . ."

"Oh, all right, let's go to sleep," Volodya said sadly.

But sleep would not come. The couch, long abandoned by her, seemed to retain the warm, clean smell of her hair, and it kept him awake. Now he seemed to see her eyes, wide open to meet his, with an expression of angry gladness in them because he was there at last, he did come after all, this awful Volodya person who was always late for dates. Or again he fancied that she was on her way, that surely she must come back to her home in Krasivaya Street which had never been absent from his thoughts in all those long years. . . .

The old man muttered softly in his sleep and snored with a thin, whistling sound. Volodya lay smoking and thinking. In the darkness and the uncanny stillness of this house everything—the war, the Germans on the other side of the Uncha, their guns and planes that bombed and set fire to Zarechye, to Yamskaya Slo-

boda, the square in front of the railway station and the wharves, the nazi tanks that, rumour said, had broken through to Chorny Yar the day before—that, and burying Polunin's records and being taken for a spy, seemed no more than a bad dream, a nightmare. All he had to do was shake himself fully awake and everything would go. It would all be dispelled the way mist is dispelled by the strong rays of the morning sun, and as quickly forgotten.

But morning came, and none of it was dispelled or forgotten.

Although war was something unknown to him and he did not fully understand what was happening about him, still that morning, he realised that the town where he grew up, and studied and reached manhood, his town would soon be unable to defend itself. Exhausted, burnt down and bleeding, it would find itself mentioned in the communique following the words: after long and heavy fighting, causing great losses to the enemy in manpower and material, our troops evacuated. . . .

At dawn, when Volodya came out of the Stepanovs' house, the town was already burning everywhere. The fires were so close together and so fierce that the sky itself, so clear and blue that day, was obscured by the smoke and the soot. And in this smoke and soot, along the streets pitted by the exploding bombs, with telephone wires hanging from smashed poles, tram rails wrenched and twisted, battle-scarred Red Army units marched, heading east. Both Krasivaya and Kosaya streets were jammed with cars, carts, detachments on foot and on horseback, tractors, lorries, and armoured cars; the soldiers never glanced at people as they marched. It was as if they felt blameworthy for evacuating the town. Only those whose strength was ebbing came to the window of one of those quiet homes to ask for a drink of water. When asked: what's going to happen now?—They would reply bitterly: "They've got the strength! They're coming on and on!"

At the enlistment office Volodya was told to wait for the Military Commissar because they were too busy at the moment to go into his case. He went and sat down on the porch steps. It was quieter here, in Prirechnaya Street. Black, stinking smoke hugged the cobblestones, and a monotonous, heart-breaking wail seemed to hang in the smoke-filled air—maybe it was made by the swirling, crackling flames of fire, or maybe it was a distant chorus of voices blended into that one sound—the lamentations of old women, the crying of children, and the cursing of men, forced to leave home. . . .

Suddenly, there was perfect quiet: the air raid was over, the All-Clear had sounded. Volodya addressed the haggard and dead-tired Military Commissar as he was starting up the steps. The man fingered Volodya's passport for a minute.

"You must go to Moscow," he said. "They issued this, didn't they?"

"But I'm registered here, at the Uncha district enlistment office," Volodya said irritably. "I'm in good health, I am able to fight, and you. . . ."

"You'll have all the fighting you want yet," the man replied and, as if remembering something, glanced at Volodya's passport again. "You're Ustimenko?"

"Yes, I'm Ustimenko."

"Not related to Aglaya Petrovna Ustimenko by any chance?"

"Yes, I am. Why?"

"Wait for me outside until I'm through, and then we'll go and see her together. . . ."

Leaving it at that, he went into the building. Immediately afterwards two lorries drove up. Soldiers, wearing boots with tarpaulin legs and brand-new uniforms, began to load them with sewn-up bags, probably stuffed with documents, packing cases, some nailed down and others tied with rope, green trunks and office furniture.

Relieved and happy to know that Aunt Aglaya was alive and he would see her soon, Volodya closed his eyes to focus his thoughts on the great moment and picture exactly how it would be. When he had called up a true-to-life image of her—with a flush on her cheeks and a subdued gleam in her black, slanting eyes, and all but heard her voice, he opened his eyes and saw Postnikov before him. Looking very trim in his military-style tunic, old riding breeches and highly polished box-calf boots, he stood there gazing with his icy, coldly-piercing eyes at the building, the lorries and the bags. And although outwardly he appeared perfectly composed, Volodya sensed that the old doctor was in a state of unbearable, hopeless despair.

Impulsively, obeying his well-meaning and powerful urge to shake Postnikov's hand at once, Volodya rushed to him, but in that same moment he heard the shout of the Military Commissar: "I can't do anything for you just now. Yes, yes, I know you, you fixed my rupture for me, I remember everything, but it's too late, understand? Too late! Go over there, you know where, which way to go. . . ."

Volodya called out Postnikov's name. The old doctor turned round. His freshly shaven, lined face was smeared with soot, and there was a nervous tic in his left cheek.

"They won't enlist me." He said with no sign of recognition, Volodya thought. "They won't take me. It's too late. . . ."

"Let's go together!" Volodya exclaimed. "We'll go together, Ivan Dmitriyevich! You're needed in this war, you are very much needed, we'll go and register and then. . . ."

"You think so?" Postnikov asked with a smirk that was unexpected and spiteful. "Do you really mean me or only yourself, Ustimenko? Aren't you simply tagging me on out of the kindness of your heart?"

The tic became more pronounced, and only then Volodya saw how tortured Postnikov looked for all his smartness and trimness, how he had aged and shrunk.

"No thank you," he said in a voice ringing with angry despair. "I'm not going to force myself on anybody! And besides, I'm too old to march. Let younger men do the walking and the running."

The Military Commissar caught his loud, angry words, and swung round to face him.

"Since you're as angry as all that I wonder why you didn't find the time to come here earlier, and why you didn't refuse the exemption certificate signed by Professor Zhovtyak which we have on our files? We've had cases like yours before, and we complied with many of the requests. . . ."

A pitiful, almost frightened expression appeared for a moment in Postnikov's eyes that were always so calm, so coldly mocking. He shrugged and without a word, without so much as a look at Volodya, walked away. Months later Volodya remembered that look in Postnikov's eyes, and much was then revealed to him. He understood many things, and blamed himself, although in those few minutes outside the enlistment office he could not have really helped that man, or could he?

Be that as it may, but in later life this memory often compelled Ustimenko to interfere and protest only in order to avert a recurrence of the same sort of disaster that had befallen Postnikov. He could have taken him to Aunt Aglaya's in the Military Commissar's lorry, couldn't he, and in his aunt's charge he would have certainly been all right!

It was not until evening that the lorries finally broke through to the Old Highway amid clouds of dust and the thunder of artillery fire. Once there, Volodya, who was in the back of a

lorry taking all the jolts and bumps in company with some chairs and stools, was given a chunk of stale bread and a large jar of raspberry jam, which, owing to the vagaries of the imagination of the war supplies office, was given to all those leaving town via Yagodnaya Sloboda where the evacuees received provisions.

Volodya, all sticky with jam, dirty, and falling asleep on his feet, found himself in front of a small log cabin at a busy railway junction where long goods trains stood on the lines. He took one step across the threshold and realised that he was facing his Aunt Aglaya.

"Know him?" the Military Commissar asked her when she raised her stern, tired and beautiful eyes to look at Volodya. "Take delivery of your foreign relative. Like him?"

"Oh," gasped Aglaya. "Oh, Volodya, dearest!"

She did not make a move, she did not even stretch her hand out to him—such was her aversion to scenes of any kind. She only gave her head a shake to believe what she saw, and believing asked: "Are you all right?"

"I'm all right."

"What's that red stuff. . . ."

"It's jam, I'm sticky with it."

The miserable paraffin lamp on the table lighted up her face, pallid from fatigue. It was hot and stuffy in the room, yet she wore a padded jacket; she was shivering, Volodya saw, but when he asked her if she was running a temperature, she told him that she simply had not had any sleep for a long time.

"The bureau has given me this jolly little job," she said with laughter in her eyes. "This entire evacuation point is mine to manage, but can a mere woman do it? Try filling the people with water alone. . . ."

Beside her a telegraph operator, huddled in an army coat, and scattering burning tobacco from his home-made cigarette, sat banging on the key. A woman whose child had strayed off stood sobbing in the dark rectangle of the open door. Everyone was trying to persuade her that the child would be found, but she was past hearing and cried: "I'll kill myself, I can't go on! Folks, I'll kill myself!"

"I've a headache," Aglaya said miserably. "Have you any pyramidon?"

Volodya searched in his pockets, although he knew he had none.

"Have you seen Granddad Mefody?"

"He's drinking champagne," Volodya told her. "Thinks of leaving town today."

"Aglaya Petrovna, shall we despatch Seven B, or shall we wait?" a harsh voice asked from the darkness outside.

"Despatch it. Get off everything you can," she told him, and then abruptly changing her businesslike tone she chanted like a sorceress: "Oh, if only some clouds would gather, if only we had rain, if only we had some foul weather so they wouldn't bomb the road, God damn them!"

Her magic must have worked—there really was a rainstorm that night. At first there was just a flicker of lightning in the parched air, then came the rumbling of thunder, and later steady rain began to fall. In the downpour the Vasilkovo Railway Station came alive: people began talking loudly and running about; in a shelter under the old bridge a huge pot of soup was being made with Aunt Aglaya's energetic assistance. Behind the warehouses men were dressing the bull that had strayed there, attracted by the sound of voices, and had been killed with two rifle shots, while in the small waiting room, fitted up as an operating theatre, Volodya assisted Dr. Tsvetkov, an Adonis if ever there was one and a hard-boiled wit, in operating on the air-raid victims. He had never seen children wounded in war, and the sight of their sufferings and their bewilderment, their splinter-mangled limbs, baby hands and legs, was so appalling, that Tsvetkov's little jokes sounded all the more hateful.

Volodya told him so, speaking in a low voice so the nurses should not hear, and got a most unexpected reply.

"Dear colleague," said Tsvetkov, "joking is better than taking heart drops, and incidentally, you look ghastly enough to swoon like a shocked young lady and very soon, too. I don't do my job too badly, do I?"

Volodya merely shrugged. Tsvetkov's work was excellent indeed—his movements were precise, quick, calm and amazingly economical.

"I wouldn't advise anyone to make a solemn rite of anything, anywhere," he said, washing up, when all the wounded had been taken care of. "It makes me sick to hear such banalities as actors playing on your nerves, poets writing with their blood, words like 'create' and 'poetise,' surgeon's gifted hands and violinist's inspired fingers! *You* like them, I suppose?"

He threw away his mask and cap, smoothed back his fair hair with an energetic and beautiful gesture, got his cigarette case out and opened it with a click.

"My trophy!" He said because he saw Volodya looking at his hands. "I killed that dirty fascist myself. Incidentally, it's gold. I'm going to contribute it to the war fund when I can find somewhere to hand such things in."

"How did you kill him? In battle?" Volodya asked, feeling like a newly admitted pupil to a school already finished by the other man.

Tsvetkov's dark-red Cupid's bow lips twitched, but he seemed to change his mind about the smile, and, frowning, told the story slowly and thoughtfully.

"We were having a binge at the casualty clearing station. I had only just gone to sleep in the dug-out when paratroopers descended on us. And I sleep like a log, I must tell you. I woke up to sounds of their gentlemanly activities: the bastards were knifing our lady doctors, I afterwards learnt. I had a pistol. And there was a small window above my bed. I looked up and saw a pair of smart officers' boots. There stood the ober-lieutenant, admiring his handiwork. I took careful aim, a miss was excluded. It was done according to all the rules of anatomy, you know, I mentally leafed through the anatomic atlas. It was a good shot, rather elegant, I'd say!"

And only now he permitted himself a smile, and held out the cigarette case to Volodya.

"Have one. They're Turkish."

"You've been saving the cigarettes?"

"I only smoke them on exceptional days."

"Such as?"

"Such as today, for instance," Tsvetkov said as if in answer to Volodya's thoughts of a few hours ago. "On days, my dear colleague, when I have to amputate a tiny little leg of a creature who cannot even talk yet but who has already suffered from fascist savagery. Get me?"

"Perfectly. Tell me, how did you come through alive that time?"

"Some tankmen came to our rescue. They were quite near in the forest. But few of the medical staff survived."

"Surely, the doctors. . ."

"They killed the doctors as well, and our nice old Nadezhda Mikhailovna, our therapist, they stabbed with a knife. This is a special, a fantastic war, you know, nothing must surprise you,

there's only one immediate task: everyone must learn how to kill, because killing hangmen is not contra-indicated for doctors, it is, in fact, recommended. Would you like a drink?"

"Thanks!" Volodya said readily and gaily.

Tsvetkov pulled a flask out of his hip pocket and held it out to Volodya.

"My first name's Kostya, and what's yours?"

"Volodya."

"Good. You stick by me, Volodya, and we'll make out. Have you got a gun?"

"No, I'm a civilian," Volodya said defensively.

"Never mind, I'll give you one, I've got a spare Walter. There's everything in Greece!"*

He handed the gun to Volodya with a perfectly boyish gesture—boastful and generous.

"The tankmen gave it to me. They liked me, wanted to keep me in their unit, but for some reason it didn't work. Here, take it and remember Doctor Tsvetkov—what a fellow you've met!"

"What's so wonderful about you, Kostya?" Volodya asked with a laugh, delighted by this unexpected friendship.

The handsome surgeon's lips slowly parted in a smile revealing his perfect, dazzlingly white teeth.

"Firstly, I'm a magnificent surgeon," he said calmly, screwing up his eyes.

"Mag-ni-fi-cent?" Volodya was too astonished for politeness.

"Yes, magnificent." Tsvetkov confirmed, not in the least offended. "Secondly, I'm a good friend, I'm a man of integrity, I'm brave, handsome, strong, smart. . . ."

"He must be insane!" thought Volodya, fearing that his guess was right.

"I reject modesty as a positive quality," Tsvetkov continued in a calm, even voice, looking deliberately into Volodya's eyes. "I have no use for it. This indispensable quality of a positive personality is bad for our work. And so I'm not modest, rather I'm presumptuous, and I suppose even brazen. . . ."

"He is mad," Volodya thought with professional calm. "A common case of insanity."

"You need have no fear of me," Tsvetkov went on gently. "I'm the sanest of mortals. It's simply that I'm exceedingly frank, that's all. Do you understand?"

* A line from Chekhov's play *The Wedding*.—Tr.

"All right, we'll have another chat later," Volodya said hastily. "I'll run across to see my aunt since we've nothing to do now. I have an aunt here, you know."

Shutting the waiting room door behind him with a bang, he rushed out into the pouring rain to look for Aglaya. It was already growing light. A new day of war was breaking over Vasilkovo Junction. A low rumble of artillery fire came from the west, from beyond the Uncha—the town was apparently still holding its own. And from here—from the murkiness of pouring rain—old clattering locomotives, that had served their time but had been resuscitated for the war, were pulling train after train out of the station, carrying away those who could not and would not reconcile themselves to the idea of possibly having to "live under the Germans".

He found Aunt Aglaya standing outside what was called her office, her face stern and very tired yet tender, a dripping tarpaulin cape thrown over her padded jacket, and a scarf on her still black hair. She did not see him, she was gazing absorbedly into the distance where, beyond the solid wall of autumn rain, her town was dying but still resisting, the town of her youth, the town where she had loved and had been loved, the town in which each street was familiar, the town where so many knew her, the town which tomorrow, if not today, would become "territory temporarily occupied by the enemy". . . .

"Oh, I can't stand it, I can't!" she burst out with a moan, pressing her scarf to her mouth. Turning to go, she saw Volodya, and through tears she no longer tried to check, begged him: "Stay with me awhile, dear, stay awhile. . . ."

He put his arm round her shoulders, shaking with her broken-hearted sobs, and, realising that no one must see her collapsing like this, confidently led the way to the wretched little flower garden behind the log cabin. They sat down on a wet bench—he a strong and silent man, and she a tortured, lost and frightened little girl.

"Give me a minute," she whispered. "Give me a minute, my darling boy, Volodya child, just one more minute. It wasn't anything, it's just that I'm tired, I've no strength left in me. And there's no news of Rodion, and I've got to keep smiling and cheering everybody up, but how can I cheer anyone up when they . . . when they are coming. . . . But they *have* come!" she gasped, as though only then understanding the horror of it. "The fascists have come!"

A voice was heard above the noise of the downpour, calling her. "Coming!" she said, and clung to Volodya's shoulder again. But she was not crying now, she was wiping her tear-wet face with her scarf, before going back to work.

"What about you?" Volodya asked softly. "Where will you go?"

"To the underground," she replied quickly and calmly. "I'm a member of the regional Party bureau, you know, Volodya dear. We're all staying behind, but keep it a secret, of course. You can only tell it to Rodion if and when you meet. Tell him personally, I mean, not in a letter."

She got up and straightened her scarf. Her cheeks were blotched with red but the weeping seemed to have refreshed her. A quick smile flashed across her face and lighted up her black eyes.

"Volodya, remember?" she whispered.

*Outside the village—something rare!
You'd never, never guess what's there.
All of a sudden from the trees
A bugle call comes on the breeze!*

"Will we hear the bugle call yet? We will live to hear it, won't we, Volodya!"

A gleam of recklessness, of a desperado's courage, of appealing slyness and devil-may-care fun, appeared in her dark eyes.

"Darling boy, forgive me my hysterics," she said, quickly knotting the ends of her scarf. "It'll never happen again. I promise."

And just as he was to remember his father always—standing on the doorstep, that long ago dawn, scanning the sky, his flyer's road, so now it was to be with Aunt Aglaya. He would always remember her as she had been in the little flower garden that rainy morning: her black scarf, glossy from the rain, tied in a hard knot, and grim mirth shining in her eloquent eyes. And he would always hear her dear voice: "Will we hear the bugle call yet? We will live to hear it! Ah, if only we will, my darling boy, you silly doctor!"

My Herds Are Not Well

Hello! How are you? And how are your herds? Daddy has quoted this for me from your letter. Hello, Vladimir Afanasyevich Ustimenko, you mean, self-centred stranger! D'you know

why I, a future star, am writing you like this? Because I'll never mail this letter, just as I didn't mail all the others I wrote before, in which I unburdened my soul to you about all sorts of things. Besides the letters I've got here, all sealed and stamped, there are more at home in Krasivaya Street, I wrote from there too, my darling, my silly idiot, my touchy, difficult happiness that was not to be. Or can't happiness be touchy? Oh, who cares what I scribble here in flat 90, 7 Prosvirin Pereulok, Moscow! All right, I am crying, I've dripped tears all over this letter, but this doesn't matter to anyone either, neither to you, to my friends, nor to a single living soul in this whole, enormous fighting world.

Listen, Ustimenko V. A.,

We put on our first real show in the first days of war. There were our daddies and mummies and also some unidentified elderly characters wearing fussy expressions on their faces. The well-known critic, I.F.L., was there too— an unapproachable, severe man in uniform. The attitude of all the others towards him was slightly apologetic, I've noticed it lots of times— civilians get sort of shy in the presence of officers, and our Victor V. was shy too, bending low when he asked the critic what he thought of the play, and the man sat swinging his foot, in the smart new boot, and relishing the eagerness with which all of us—daddies, mummies and actors—were listening to his silence. He remained silent, swinging and swinging his foot and not saying anything until the air raid was over and the All Clear sounded. And only then did he stretch, his muscles cracking, yawn, and utter slowly and weightily, you know how. "I'm afraid you may be making yourselves ridiculous in the face of history, my dear friends. Classics at a time like this!"

Our fat Nastya, she's terribly fat, Volodya, she waddles like a duck, and wears size forty shoes "at a pinch", the kindest of souls and a crybaby, well, she removed her make-up and burst out crying, while Victor Victorovich kept pacing the room behind our backs, and clenching his fists recited as if he were playing melodrama: "So utterly to miss the essence of our seekings! And did not our boys dig trenches? And are not four of our boys in the Home Guard? And do we not put out incendiary bombs? Are we shirkers?"

"No, we're not," Nastya said tearfully.

She weeps in a very deep bass, by the way. I spoke up too, to say we weren't shirkers. And no matter what you may be thinking in your Khara, no matter how much you despise everyone

except yourself, we are also somebody here, of which you will now become convinced, you smug, narrow-minded doctor.

I'll go on in the third person, otherwise it will sound like bragging.

Shortly after that she (that is me, Varya) was invited to a place in Gogolevsky Boulevard, a small, two-storey building, painted yellow. It was very formal there, polite naval officers with gold chevrons were talking in the corridor, and a sailor, also very polite, with a queer little pipe on his breast and a rifle in his hand, was standing in the hall downstairs. She was taken into an office and asked to sit down. A naval officer, the ship commander type, with what she'd call a wind-seared face and a piercing look, was sitting behind a large desk and turning over the pages of a magazine with a finger as he spoke into the telephone about soffits, colour-wash, artificial silk and cold cream as if he were quite at home in the theatre business. It sounded a bit strange to her that he should be talking of powder-blue artificial silk and not guns, or warships or firing, but that's exactly what he did, and it dawned on her before long that he was simply the chief of all sea and ocean theatres, that it was his job, and that he wasn't even supposed to say: "Fire! Ready about!" Evidently that was done by other naval officers, and this one may have done it when he was quite young.

"You have my permission to report me," the chief of all theatres said at last, hung up, and went on fuming for another second, jerking his eyebrows and tapping his cigarette on the lid of his cigarette case. Then he swung round and told Varya that he had seen her in the show and was offering her a job with a theatrical company of one of the fleets. He was still angry and kept glaring at the telephone, but soon he forgot the nasty man on the other end of the wire. He and Varya did not talk very long.

And the chief of all sea and ocean theatres wasn't very persuasive either. This is what he said:

"We can't offer you anything extraordinary, comrade Stepanova. Neither the salary nor the living conditions can be made very attractive. But it's wartime, and the Navy needs you. You'll be busy most of the time. Ours isn't a bad theatre. It's up to you to decide."

Varya was speechless. No one had ever said such things to her before. The Navy needs you, he had said. She was needed

by the Navy. She, Varya Stepanova—an actress. Her talent was needed by the Navy in wartime.

Her heart beat fast and her cheeks flamed. She wanted to answer straight away, but how? To say: "Thank you for your offer, I accept," or: "With pleasure!" would sound silly. Supposing he imagined she had a repertoire all ready, that she had played many roles? Supposing he simply did not know that the only parts she had ever played were fragments, études, and Larissa in *The Dowerless Bride*? And that, naturally, she had some pieces for a concert programme.

The chief of all theatres was smoking a cigarette and watching her intently. He wasn't the sort to lie to or make yourself out better than you were.

"We invited an actress here," suddenly he began to speak with anguish in his voice. "She could play Ibsen's Nora but as for doing solo concert numbers, the very idea offended her. Now *Doll's House* is a powerful play, of course, but you can't swing a psychological play on board a destroyer or on an airfield during an air raid. . . ."

"Oh, I do understand!" Varya cried, and then she thought of her father. He, too, would have said: "you can't swing a psychological play" the way this chief of all sea and ocean theatres said it.

After that they took her from one room to another and she filled in various forms. Her fingers got ink-stained, her nose began to shine, and her passport and also the *Smyena* magazine she had bought because it had a picture of her in it, got mislaid. Naval officers with weather-beaten faces and chevrons on their sleeves found both her passport and the magazine, but in the meantime she had lost her handbag. It was all like a dream. In the forms she filled in she wrote, the word "actress" several times. She also wrote that she had never served in the tsarist or the whiteguard armies, and other information about herself required for the future that was unfolding before her. Then they took her downstairs and then upstairs again. A young boy who had a revolver and wore an arm band and a cap which he never took off escorted her on all these trips. This boy, in spite of his arm band, cap and revolver, was not stuck-up like that critic. He did not say anything about history, was very polite, and Varya heard him whisper to a mate of his: "I'm helping this actress with the formalities. She's coming to our fleet."

And then he asked her:

"Comrade Stepanova, please tell me how do people learn to be actors?"

That's when they were sitting on a varnished yellow seat waiting for someone to put a signature on yet another form.

Varya powdered her nose and began to explain it to him.

"Stepanova, sign this!" a grey-haired, important-looking colonel shouted from behind the counter. "Where the tick is."

She signed where the tick was, and was then taken to receive her rations. It made her remember her childhood in Kronstadt, her father's ship, and everyone petting and spoiling her. A sailor who was exactly like one of those old sailors of father's, good-natured and elderly, called her "daughter", and gave her an overweight of pork fat, a loaf of white bread, butter, sugar, and even a little salt. Next he gave her the tinned food she was entitled to, and some tea, the weight of a five-kopek piece. She also received a ration of loose tobacco, cigarettes, matches and soap.

"But I don't smoke," she said.

"Others do," the sailor said with a sigh. "You can give it to them. You'll take to smoking yourself, better make no promises, in war people only remain non-smokers till the first trouble. . . ."

She smoked one of those cigarettes, just in case.

And this *she*, my dear friend Vladimir Afanasyevich, is me—Varvara Rodionovna Stepanova.

So she began to smoke. She went away, came back, and 48 hours later, having gone all this time without sleep, arrived with the rest of the concert team at an aviation unit, stationed near the cemetery. The planes stood camouflaged between the tombstones and trees, we gave our performance in a huge tent to the light of pocket torches. And I remembered the *Doll's House*.

However, what is any of this to you, Volodya dear?

I can picture how you'd look reading this letter if it ever came to you.

Or maybe you have changed a little with the years? Maybe you do notice other people now, even if very, very slightly, just a wee bit, and are not dividing everything in this world into black and white. Maybe you've become more thoughtful and observant?

One of our actresses when we were still in the Navy used to sing a song which had a line: "And I'll live, longing for you." It always wrung my heart to hear those words. But I still remember

them! I was busy day and night, I thought and I still think my work was useful, yes, yes, Comrade Ustimenko—they laughed, those pilots, sailors, those motor torpedo boat and submarine crews, anti-aircraft and artillery gunners, when I sang my ditties for them. My work cheered them, and I saw a pilot laughing, still laughing, as he climbed into his fighter, it was for him I sang, acted and danced to make it a little easier for him up there, in the sky, later on. . . .

And in spite of all this, even in spite of the fact that in our years of separation there have been men in love with me and I have been in love too, I can't do without you.

And at the moment, to make it worse, I'm at a loose end.

And I haven't an idea where to go. I know nothing at all about mother, father doesn't write either, and I can't sing any more. After our ship had been torpedoed in the bay I lost my voice. It's late, I've forgotten to get my bread and I haven't cooked my porridge, I'm awfully hungry and I'd love to have a cry, but there's no shoulder I could weep on.

Dear Comrade Ustimenko.

Write me a letter beginning with the words: "Varya, Ginger, you see. . . ."

And I'll come to you, Volodya darling, my love, my tormentor, to whatever end of the world you say. We'll never quarrel nor fail to understand one another. We'll live our life splendidly. But there won't be a letter from you, Volodya.

My herds are not well, they couldn't be worse.

Miracles Small and Big

"What a crew!" said Tsvetkov, examining his "army" with little friendliness. "Lions, the lot of them!"

The men cleared their throats in embarrassment, and shuffled their feet. There were thirty-nine of them—civilians, caught in the German pincers in Vasilkovo, and army men who had lost contact with their units.

"Any local people?" Tsvetkov asked.

"Yes, my name is Kholodilin, I am a reader at the university," replied a well-bred baritone.

A man wearing a grey civilian overcoat with an army belt stepped forward and attempted to strike an attitude that he must have imagined the present circumstances called for.

"Are you a hunter?" Tsvetkov asked with a nod at the double-barrelled gun the man was holding.

"Anything but. This is simply a weapon, you see, a sixteen-calibre Sauer. And there are a dozen cartridges. That means a dozen fascists."

A restrained giggle came from the others. Tsvetkov eyed them sternly.

"Can you take us across the Low Marshes?"

"I'll do my best," Kholodilin said with exaggerated courtesy.

"But you do know the place, I hope?"

"Rather thoroughly, comrade commander. As a matter of fact I've been working there with my group for several weeks, over a month actually, trying to find a certain exceptionally rare specimen..."

"Good." Tsvetkov interrupted the lecturer before he could tell him more. "Very good."

He took another long, keen look at his army and then made a speech, which Volodya was to remember for a long time. Afterwards, in moments of stress, he often tried to imitate Tsvetkov's manner, but never with success.

"Listen now," said Volodya's idol of the moment. "I must ask you to listen carefully because I am not accustomed to repeating anything. By force of circumstances I am your commander with full authority vested in me. I have a deputy—here he is: Mikhail Pavlovich Romanyuk, a veteran Communist, once a lance-corporal in the tsar's army and bearer of the St. George Cross, and later a cavalryman in the civil war, where he lost his right arm fighting against the world counter-revolution. But this old soldier, who has been in many a battle, has kept his head, and his experience is now at our service. We also have our medical service in the person of a wonderful surgeon Vladimir Afanasyevich Ustimenko, who recently represented our glorious Soviet medicine beyond the borders of our country. Please step forward, comrades Romanyuk and Ustimenko. Let the detachment have a look at you."

Snorting with embarrassment, Romanyuk pushed his way forward, doffed his old-fashioned cap, smoothed down his cropped grey hair, and dropped his eyes, frowning. Volodya also took a step towards Tsvetkov, tugged at the folds of his foreign raincoat, pushed the holster attached to his army belt slightly farther back, and then, ashamed of striking this picturesque pose, quickly slipped behind Tsvetkov's back.

"As of this moment the use of the term 'encircled men' is forbidden. Anyone who dares speak of our wonderful detachment in this way will be severely punished. And there will be no escaping it. Our detachment which will certainly overcome all obstacles, is composed of people deeply devoted to our great Motherland. Our detachment from now on till the day of its honourable disbandment will be called Death to the Fascists . . ."

An incoherent, joyful hubbub resounded briefly in the birchwood. The men who a minute before had appeared to Volodya so gloomy, worn out and spiritless, now braced themselves, and the few surreptitious smiles that did appear vanished at once, as though frightened off by Tsvetkov's steely voice.

"Profound confidence in Soviet man, in his inflexible will, his hatred of oppressors, his sacred wrath against the invaders—these are the qualities that have united us in this detachment. We trust one another entirely. Among us there are no cowards, traitors or deserters. We shall never dare suspect one another of such crimes. It is not in the nature of any of us to succumb to animal instincts, to try save our own skins, or to commit treachery. But if trouble of this sort should happen, and I do not believe it will, but just supposing it should, I will not hesitate to shoot the rat in the name of our detachment, in the name of our Motherland, in the name of the Bolshevik Party, with this gun taken off a fascist bastard that I myself killed."

Seemingly unaware of the gun in his hand, Tsvetkov continued solemnly as though reading a pledge. "I'm strong, brave, hardy and clever. I've been in the war since the very first day. You've got to trust me completely because I have done more soldiering than you, I know that the fascists can be beaten and that we, our Red Army, will defeat them so crushingly that all our future enemies will think twice before they venture to attack us again. I have finished comrades! We're starting out today. From now on my orders are law. Consequently, anyone failing to carry them out will be proclaimed an outlaw. Under my command we shall overcome all difficulties with honour and will break through to our comrades-in-arms without losing a man. Hurrah!"

The "hurrah" sounded odd, even a trifle funny coming at the end of Tsvetkov's strange speech. Still, it was a "hurrah" and it was shouted three times, and when Volodya looked closer at the men's faces he realised that they were stirred and excited by their none-too-modest commander's speech. And later that

night, when the detachment was approaching the Chirkovo meadow where the Low Marshes began, he explained to Volodya in a low, sombre voice:

"I'm not a braggart, Ustimenko, I am a performing hypnotist. But when one-third of the men have no weapons, another third are either ill or wounded, and only the remaining one-third are fit for fighting, nothing but inspiration can save the day..."

Volodya said nothing.

"You think I won't make the break-through?" Tsvetkov asked in a hot whisper. "Don't worry, I will. All the fortunetellers in the world say I was born lucky. I'm immortal, and I succeed in whatever I undertake. Have I made myself clear, Ustimenko?"

Volodya sensed a threat in that last sentence, and grinned. But Tsvetkov saw the grin, or rather divined it, even in the complete darkness of that autumn night, and said with a queer, low chuckle:

"I'll shoot the sceptic and pessimist who doubts the safe outcome of this scheme of ours, I'll shoot him and never glance back. Even if this doubting Thomas happens to be my colleague Dr. Ustimenko. For this we crave your indulgence and forgiveness, as they used to say in old letters. You don't like it?"

They were walking side by side, and Volodya could feel Tsvetkov's warm breath on his cheek. Was he supposed to take it in fun? No, Volodya knew perfectly well that Tsvetkov was anything but joking. Though he was smiling and breathing so trustingly into Volodya's cheek, he would not spare the thirty-ninth man's life for the sake of the other thirty-eight.

Not he!

But it was after Tsvetkov's inspired speech, that calm was restored to Volodya for the first time since that moment in the waiting room at Vasilkovo Junction when the sentry came in to tell them—two surgeons in the midst of an operation, that the German pincers had locked near Kurganovka, about one hundred and seven kilometres to the east. He now felt composed, confident and even cheerful.

Small miracles began to happen near Chirkovo Meadow. Kholodilin, the absent-minded and courteous university reader, who according to all divine and human laws ought to have got everything mixed up as all scholarly cranks are supposed to do, got nothing mixed up at all and led the detachment along a decent enough path across the Low Marshes. And even the halt for sleep on dry land which he promised for 3 a.m. began no

more than forty minutes late. They were quite safe now on this island in the swamp. They dried themselves around the fires they lit, and Volodya got busy with the wounded, changing their dressings and meanwhile cursing himself roundly for never having learned to make a splint with a penknife that would be lighter and more comfortable than the standard Thomas splint. But then he didn't have even one of those with him. Nor was there any cotton wool, but this lack was supplied when Romanyuk, the old cavalryman, drew Volodya's attention to the moss.

"Tear it up by the roots and dry it, and it'll do fine," he said, with a cozy sort of yawn. "In my day in Volyn we used it often. Come on, doctor, get out your knife to cut the bread..." And then he asked, marvelling. "You don't mean to say they didn't teach you that in your universities? They could have done that, if nothing else..."

"Oh they taught us all right!" Tsvetkov put in with an angry little chuckle. "But they taught us how to use everything ready-made, blast them. All nice and ready for us..."

It was already light, the men had eaten their fill of millet porridge cooked under the direction of Tsvetkov, who went into everything and supervised everything. Now he ordered them to bed down. He posted a guard, because that was how things should be done. When everyone had gone to sleep he conferred for a long time with his scholarly guide and old Romanyuk, who kept mumbling something, trying to have his say, no doubt.

"By and large, everything will be the way I said. Fair enough?" Volodya heard, dropping off.

"Couldn't be more so, could it!" he thought and the next moment was fast asleep.

The second day of their march was immeasurably harder than the first.

Rain poured ceaselessly from the low, dirty-yellow bloated sky and thin, rusty mud squelched under their feet. The corduroy road along which Kholodilin was taking them had rotted in many places, and when they came to one of those places Volodya had the illusion that the horizon shrank, that he himself was a stunted creature, and the men wading knee-deep through the slush were all midgets....

Here, in the marsh, a life of its own went on: a wild boar would flee, crashing into the thickets; wood grouse and black grouse would start up with a frightening cry from under their very feet, and once a huge old elk suddenly jumped into view

to vanish a little way off. And the trees here, too, lived their own private lives till the end of their days, for no one felled them, and unless struck by lightning or uprooted in a storm, they lived to old age and died a natural death.

But difficult though the going was the men soon adapted themselves to it. Many found it easier to walk with their boots off. Kholodilin, that catcher of snakes and other crawling things, led the way followed by two Byelorussians from Polesye who knew the idiosyncrasies of the swamp well. They were Minka Tsedunko, a boy with a large head and a baby's eyes of cornflower blue, and his quiet young friend Foma, wounded in the shoulder and very sorry for himself, whom everyone most deferentially called Foma Narkisovich, because he was so young. Next came the commander. He wore a brown leather raglan of excellent quality, a knapsack slung over his shoulders, and at his side his gun in a holster. He walked with an easy resilient stride, his sunburnt face looking the more handsome for the raindrops glistening on it. Volodya, glancing now and again at his fine, haughtily hooked nose and winglike dark eyebrows, strong, shapely mouth and broad shoulders, thought not without envy: "Nature is certainly generous towards some people, grudging them nothing, above all else confidence in themselves, their abilities and their power. But in times of stress aren't those the important things?"

Suddenly Tsvetkov slipped on a rotten log on the edge of the corduroy road, worn away by time and dampness, and all the men froze in joyfully tense expectation. Surely the devil would hit the filthy slough like any other mortal? No, he did not fall. His feet encased in smart box calf boots seemed to do a few steps of a dance, then with a twist he righted himself. He lit a cigarette with a quick, careless gesture and walked on as before without a backward glance at his men. And probably none but Volodya noticed that the face of this man who was making himself a legend had turned somewhat pale for a fraction of a second.

"Gosh, what a man!" Volodya thought with cheerful envy. "He must not fall so he does not. The way he wants it to be so it will be all his life till the day of his death. Maybe this gay devil is immortal?"

"Comrade commander," he said. "Can I ask you something?"

"Shoot," Tsvetkov answered, glancing at Volodya out of the corner of his laughing eyes.

"Have you ever thought about death?"

"Only fools don't" he answered in what Volodya thought was a deliberately loud voice. "Of course I have."

"I wonder what sort of thoughts you had," Volodya asked, subtly tinging his voice with humility. "What is it, what is death?"

"Death, to begin with, is not frightening."

"What do you mean—not frightening?"

"Just that. Shall I tell you what I think of it myself?"

The slimy, insecure logs made the going pretty hard and everyone was tired. Volodya's question and Tsvetkov's deliberately loud answers were heard by many, and everyone wanted to hear what would be said. The whole detachment crowded close to the two men, and walking side by side became difficult.

"This is why I'm not afraid of it," Tsvetkov said in a loud, lecturing tone. "While I am. . . ."

Their eyes met for a fleeting second, and Volodya thought he read a message: "I'm not saying this for you, I'm saying it for all of them, and the fact that the idea's not mine is nobody's business. For all of you just now I'm the wisest of the wise, so don't interfere!"

"Well, go on," Volodya said. "While you are. . . ."

"While I am, death is not and cannot be. And when death comes I won't be there any more, so our paths will never cross. Understand?"

"Oh, yes," Volodya gasped, feigning astonishment. "That's a marvellous way of looking at it! Magnificent!"

"Only the idea's not mine," Tsvetkov admitted as loudly and preceptorially. "I came across it in some book and liked it. It suited me."

A hum of approval rose behind them, for the idea suited everyone just then, and Volodya felt an utter fool: he had misinterpreted the message in those eyes, Tsvetkov was a far more interesting and complex character than he had thought. He wasn't a fraud, he believed in what he was doing. And he did it with all he had in him.

Old Romanyuk, the one-armed cavalryman, didn't like all this talk about life and death, but he only puffed and blew angrily for even he lacked the courage to oppose Tsvetkov openly. Tsvetkov went striding along the corduroy road, whistling a tune, smoking a cigarette, looking keenly about him and thinking thoughts that befit a commander who bears sole responsibility

for the fate of a detachment, for the life of his men, for victory in coming battles.

The men didn't bother him. He's thinking, they murmured with a wink and a nod and everything's in order. He's a reliable sort, he's no windbag. He's a real commander. . . .

On the fourth day of the march with its small miracles a great miracle happened, and even Volodya was somewhat overawed.

Early that morning, the sun—a strangely hot sun for the time of year—slipped through the mass of hateful sodden clouds, and a steady, warm and sweet breeze came up. The sky cleared and became blue, and the men—the trials of their trek across the swamp over—dried themselves in the blessed sun with roars of happy laughter, and then the weaker ones caught up on their sleep, while the hardier washed their clothes. Semyon Ilyich Babichuk, an old soldier, even ventured into the nearby stream to “clean out his clogged pores” as he explained to Dr. Ustimenko.

Here, in these wilds, known as Island Country, where marshes merged with lakes, and lakes merged with marshes, they could do anything they liked. And they did. They went barefoot, some clad only in shorts, lit fires, cooked broths, and in the coals baked the wild ducks, after coating them with mud, which Mitya Golubev, ignoring Kholodilin's fervent protests, had shot down with his gun.

And it was Mitya himself who tried to console him. “Don't be so cut up about it! You couldn't kill a fascist with that fowling piece. It takes a bullet to do that. We'll get you a nice little rifle later on, you can take my Komsomol word. . . .”

Volodya, having finished changing the men's bandages and examining the blisters on the feet of those who had not learned in all those months how to turn their foot-cloths properly, lay down on high ground and dozed off, and it was then that the veritable miracle, which actually frightened him, happened.

“Ustimenko, get up,” Tsvetkov spoke above him. He was freshly shaved and smelled of Chypre. He carried a bottle in his knapsack. (There's everything in Greece!) They had been calling each other by their surnames from the moment Tsvetkov assumed command, quite forgetting their earlier pledge to use first names only. “Come on, doctor, get up, it's urgent. Get up!”

Volodya got to his feet, and shaking his head, heavy with sleep, ran down the slope after the quickly striding commander. Without glancing over his shoulder once, Tsvetkov plunged into

the dripping osier thickets, whistled repeatedly to Volodya as to a hunting dog, and moved on. It went on for so long that Volodya quite decided to take offence when suddenly he heard himself squealing like an old woman and felt his mouth hanging open. A huge frog-green German transport plane, gashed along the length of its fuselage, lay in a pool of stagnant water. With its belly it had ripped up the swamp, as with a giant ploughshare, digging up the tree stumps and the old crooked pines.

"What is it?" Volodya asked in a hushed voice.

"That! It's an airplane," Tsvetkov informed him, putting a foot on a stump and flicking his leg with a twig. "A machine for flying that is heavier than air. We're now going to climb inside, but I'm warning you, the flight won't be nice. . . ."

"But what's inside?"

"Bodies, submachine-guns, cartridges, hand grenades, pistols, food and lots of flies. She crashed, I should say about two months ago at the very least. She didn't explode because there was not a drop of fuel in the tanks. Something must have happened to them, but with no expert among us we can't tell what. . . ."

"Were they all killed outright?" Volodya asked, nodding towards the sprawling machine.

"Probably. However. I found the door jammed, and had to heave four bodies off. I suppose they tried to get out, but collapsed in the attempt."

Tsvetkov poured some shag into a bit of newspaper, rolled and lit the cigarette, inhaled deeply and bending low stepped into the dark opening of the door. Ustinenko followed him, and as he walked along the torn, warped floor, he tried not to breathe or look too closely at all those bloated, bursting and no longer human faces from which came a buzzing sound. The millions of flies that had taken possession of the bodies putrefying in the heat made it seem that the Germans themselves were buzzing.

"Come on!" Tsvetkov shouted in a constrained voice.

Volodya turned to look and saw him throwing submachine-guns and some metal boxes out of a window.

"Take things!" he commanded.

And only then did he understand what he was to take and from whom. The paratroopers' short submachine-guns had to be taken from those dead men, pulled out of what was once their hands, removed from under their arms, and their legs.

Clenching his teeth tight and blowing away the flies, whose buzzing had swelled to an angry zoom of resentment, trying not

to see anything but the weapons and cartridge cases, Volodya got to work. In spite of himself he did see some belts, tarnished badges, special movie cameras, a fine chamois glove, a packet of cigarettes lying on the edge of a rusty chest, a service cap with a tall crown, and grey cloth. . . .

"Time out!" Tsvetkov rapped out the order.

They were once more in the sunlight and the gentle wind. They could have a smoke now, but first they washed their hands with some German disinfectant, a very oily liquid Tsvetkov had found in a small container among the drugs.

"Shouldn't we call the others in to help?" Volodya suggested.

"D'you feel so overworked? No, we two are best suited for the job, after all we have handled corpses before by virtue of our profession. And, besides, you know. . . ."

He glanced at Volodya with that boastfully boyish expression of his, a smile playing on his lips, and declared almost solemnly: "I love bestowing gifts! I love everything spectacular! Can you picture it? Listen, comrade fighters of the Death to Fascism detachment, is there anyone who'd like a gun sent to us, personally, by Adolf Hitler? There'll be general excitement of course, everyone will start asking: how, where, why? Can't you just see it?"

"Oh yes, I can," Volodya said, smiling.

"That's better! After all, it was the Führer who armed us. It's one of war's little jokes."

Tsvetkov made himself comfortable on a fallen tree, and sat lost in thought for a few minutes, drawing hard on his cigarette.

"I wonder," he said as if to himself.

"What?"

"I'd like to dissect a couple of them. They all look sort of shortened. Squashed. Didn't you notice? They all died within a brief space of time, when the plane hit the ground, I expect. We'll look into it later in the day."

Volodya sat blinking and sighing. He felt sick. Tsvetkov, too, was pretty pale, rather greenish actually.

"We've got the most sickening part to do now," Tsvetkov said.

"Those stiffs have pistols on them, and we need them as well. We need everything," he said with a forced, grim chuckle. "Fair enough, doctor? We're terribly poor, you know, this brave detachment of ours. . . ."

It was already two in the afternoon when at last they finished their gruesome job, wrapped the weapons in the German officers' rubber capes, and went down to the river to wash themselves clean.

"Not a word to anyone!" Tsvetkov told Volodya sternly. "Or you'll spoil the whole effect. This thing has to be handled superbly, so the men will remember this day all their lives. . . ."

He took off his clothes, glanced at the slimy water with distaste, got in and pushed off with the strong breast strokes of a professional swimmer.

"It's cold, dammit!" he shouted from the middle of the river. "It's so cold it stings, but don't be scared, doctor, jump in!"

* * *

"People were getting a bit worried," Babichuk told them when they got back. "They wanted to go and look for you."

"Ten men, follow me!" Tsvetkov ordered.

The men exchanged alarmed looks, wondering what was afoot.

They returned some forty minutes later. Mitya Golubev appeared first: he had a subdued, even a languorous look. Minka T'sedunko trailed behind him—his cornflower blue eyes staring with something like delighted horror. The cultured Kholodilin, glasses misted and jaw hanging open, was carrying his submachine-guns as if they were a load of firewood. Tsvetkov brought up the rear, his expression imperturbable once again, his appearance quite spruce, for he had tidied himself up and had even managed to give his smart boots a quick shine with the Germans' boot polish. He walked with a nonchalant air, flicking his boots with a twig, and seemed not to see his flabbergasted men. A hush fell, and then everyone heard old Romanyuk suddenly emit a string of strong oaths in a high, dreamy voice, trilling and warbling like a nightingale's.

They laid the guns down on a cape, as solemnly and gingerly as if they were made of precious glass. Tsvetkov walked up to the pile, looked at it silently for a minute, touched a submachine-gun with the toe of his boot, and then sweeping the men with a quick, keen look, said:

"Well then, comrades, this is how it is. Armed with these weapons a good soldier could fight his way to Berlin, let alone break through to his own people. . . ."

"It's fantastic!" Kholodilin suddenly shouted. "It smacks of the supernatural, of spirit rapping, even the Indian yogis couldn't do it. . . ."

"They couldn't, but we can," Tsvetkov said calmly. "We have truth on our side, comrades," he continued, scanning his men's

faces intently and gravely. "We're all of us good, honest people, and we must not just break through but must inflict telling losses on the bloody occupation troops. The weapons were put our way because we're fighting a true cause. Fair enough?"

There was a murmur of approval, and then with a princely gesture Tsvetkov handed Minka Tsedunko a submachine-gun and a German paratrooper's knife. Then he told the next man to come up. A queue was formed in a matter of seconds, and as he handed out the weapons Tsvetkov had something stirring, admirable and impressive to say to each man. It could hardly be said he handed them the weapons, rather he bestowed them and all felt that from then on everything would be perfectly all right, because with a commander who could perform such miracles no harm could come to them. . . .

After the bestowing of the arms ceremony, Tsvetkov made another short speech, informing them how he intended to act from then on. Receipt of these weapons, he said, obligated them to perform tasks incomparably more difficult than what they may have earlier supposed. For some reason known only to himself he now called the detachment the "flying" detachment "Death to Fascism" and since even the strongest of men are often no more than big children at heart, the addition appealed to all of them tremendously. Later Volodya was to hear Tsvetkov's fighters saying with happy arrogance: "We're the flying detachment, they'll get what's coming to them. . . ."

All that afternoon they cleaned, polished, oiled and examined the new weapons. Tsvetkov, his mind far away, listened to Babuchuk, who was the quickest to master the intricacies of the submachine-guns. Volodya was sorting out the German paratroopers' medical supplies. All the glass containers were of course smashed, but the powders, ointments and pills would come in useful. The set of surgical instruments was not bad either. Mitya Golubev was studying the food concentrates, and Terentiev, the land-reclamation engineer, his bulbous nose saddled with a pince-nez, was thoughtfully reading the labels on the cans.

"French sardines! And this . . . this paste is made from goose liver. Made in Burgundy. And this one here says it's made in Holland. Now, what is this? Is it meat or milk, I wonder? There's a cow on the label, and yet. . . ."

Towards nightfall it grew colder, and then the stars came out. Volodya and Tsvetkov lay in a hollow, gazing at the sky and talking leisurely.

"We ought to dissect one more of them at least," Tsvetkov said in a tired voice. "The picture is still not quite clear. . . ."

"What's not clear about it, it's perfectly clear," Volodya said. "Each has a broken spinal column, broken in several places. Fractured shin bones and cervical vertebrae. . . . They crashed suddenly, the plane did not glide at all. The door is on ground level, and everything else is either smashed or buried below. Can you imagine the force of the impact? And didn't that door get wedged in! The whole fuselage is cracked down its entire length. The floor has been dented from below, and those hands or whatever you call them are all out of shape, too. Oh, by the way, how did you sight that plane?"

"Rather simply. I've a pair of binoculars, you know. I looked about me and noticed something shining. It was the only porthole to survive the crash as I afterwards realised. Shall we get some sleep?"

But they did not feel like sleep. A little later, hearing Tsvetkov strike a match and light up, Volodya asked: "Tell me, how did you become a doctor?"

"By accident," he replied with a chuckle. "I know what you'd like to hear. A story about the great call, right? Something sentimental—I saw a doggie being run over and so I carried it home, put its broken leg in splints, the doggie grew attached to me and eventually saved me from a gang of robbers, and I dedicated my life to suffering mankind. Right?"

Volodya's silence was eloquently resentful.

"Your puffing says you're displeased," Tsvetkov said. "No, it wasn't like that at all. Life's much more involved than those tear-jerking tales out of a reader. I wanted to get into a certain educational establishment, but I was out of luck, I failed with a bang in the main subject, so I thought and thought, worried and wondered, and then my glance fell upon a student of the Military Medical Academy. I passed the entrance exams beautifully, a splendid example to others, and later one of the professors, a nice little old chap, actually spoke to me with some emotion about my potential resources as a general practitioner. He was quite upset when I told him that what I wanted to be was a military commander and not a military surgeon. Well, I naturally became interested in medicine eventually, because if you do a thing at all you must do it magnificently. . . ."

He spoke in a leisurely manner, and it sounded to Volodya as if he were telling him not about himself but about someone else,

a not very close friend of his. He spoke with respect but without a trace of affection for that person, appraising him calmly and thoughtfully.

"Of course, if surgery were to become a science," he remarked casually, "because, you know. . ."

"What do I know?"

"No, can't talk about it to you," Tsvetkov again spoke with a chuckle. "You're still in a worshipful trance, you know, you're one of those who after a normal appendectomy are liable to make a speech about a life that was all but lost and happily saved. . ."

"Oh well, don't if you can't!" Volodya said, feeling offended.

"And now you're making an issue of it!" Tsvetkov drawled, yawning. "I was only joking. However, let's go to sleep, my good Doctor Haas, we've a busy day tomorrow. . ."

From Tsvetkov's manner next morning no one would have guessed that he and Volodya had talked of anything important the night before—he was the commander and Volodya his subordinate, and not a very bright one at that, who had not as yet been able even to pack the German drugs properly.

"You're not on your foreign job now!" Tsvetkov rapped out, looking straight into Volodya's angry eyes. "We're fighting a war here, and it's time you remembered it."

"Did you get a ticking off, doctor?" Kholodilin asked when they were already on the march. "He's a Napoleon on a small scale, that's what the man is, don't you agree?"

"I think he's an excellent commander," said Volodya, hoisting up the heavy knapsack in which he carried all his drugs and instruments. "And I deserved it."

Towards the end of the afternoon the detachment came to the railway, Solyanishche-Unchansk. From the security of the forest the men peered through the drizzle: a rail car with several tensely motionless Germans on it, wearing helmets and capes, and with a medium machine-gun on the front bench, went past the track walker's hut at full speed. The track walker jumped out, saluted, and remained at attention for a long time, watching the car out of sight.

"In their service already," Tsvetkov said glumly.

When it grew quite dark and a red light appeared in the track walker's window, Tsvetkov and Golubev jerked the door open, grabbed the old man, who looked respectable and smelled of herring, dragged him outside and told him to take them to the "fascist bastards". The old man fell on the ballast, wringing his hands

and whining, and on his bended knees begged them to have mercy on him, to spare a poor man in his old age. But Tsvetkov pushed his gun into his face, and forced him to take the detachment to the level crossing where, he had said, there were at least six fascists.

Romanyuk now walked beside the commander; behind them, hand grenades and pistols on the ready, came the "shock group" -- Telegin, Terentiev and Mitya Golubev. The "reserve" was under Bahichuk's command.

From the wide open door of the shack on the level crossing a mouth organ sounded dismally. Even from that distance they could see that there was a fire in the stove: from the open furnace door its reflection danced on the wet rails beside which a German sentry with a carbine under his arm slowly paced up and down, his shadow crossing the lighted door now from the left, now from the right, with pedantic precision.

"Let's go," Tsvetkov ordered sharply.

The shock group moved forward at once, climbed the low embankment, and marched quickly towards the shack.

"Halt!" the sentry called, but the sound was instantly drowned in a stream of such savage German oaths that Volodya did not immediately recognise the hoarse voice as Tsvetkov's or understand his rather simple plot.

When he did, hand grenades were already bursting inside the shack where only a minute before a mouth organ had been playing so softly, and soon short bursts of submachine-gun fire came from the aspen wood beyond the crossing where the only surviving German had fled, shooting back as he ran.

"Let me go after him," Mitya Golubev begged Tsvetkov, his eyes shining excitedly in the darkness. "I can see in the dark, comrade commander, I know this wood, and he's just a German sausage. . . ."

"No," Tsvetkov said in a tired voice.

Another burst of fire came from the aspen wood.

"He's so scared he can't see straight," Golubev said with longing.

Restraining himself no longer, he dashed around the shack, slipping on the muddy slope.

"Come back, you fool! Come back!" Tsvetkov shouted.

But too late. Golubev was an easy mark for the German as he appeared against the lighted rectangle of the window. And the German killed him.

"That's that." Tsvetkov said with quiet finality. "There you are."

And in those words Volodya heard a warning, a bitter threat, and a strange, mournful solemnity.

They buried Golubev near the country road, a kilometre or two from the level crossing. A cold drizzling rain was still falling, and a wind started up, whistling in the ancient aspen wood.

"Why couldn't he live," Tsvetkov said softly at the open grave, his voice husky from sweating at the German sentry. "Why couldn't he live and come home in glory after victory..."

From the pocket of his brown leather raglan, that was now sodden and black, he produced the five dog tags removed from the five dead Germans, threw them at Golubev's feet and added, turning away: "To make it jollier for you lying there..."

They threw up the grave mound quickly. Tsvetkov lit a cigarette and started off ahead of his men.

"A fine singing voice is called a divine gift," Romanvuk was saying to Kholodilin. "Well, it's the same with a fine commander. I'll tell you quite honestly, at first I thought he was a bit of a windbag. Even an adventurer. But now, my friends and comrades, I tell you no! He has that gift, he understands..."

Volodya, walking behind them, heard it. And bitter though the loss of Golubev was, it suddenly seemed to him that in Tsvetkov's warning shout and in all that followed lay the earnest for the security and success of their flying detachment.



Chapter 2

One Dark Autumn Night...

Some time after nine, on the hazy, stormy night of November 6, 1941, the flying detachment, came unseen to the outskirts of a slumbering village - Belopolye.

The tall, skinny and very drunk peasant they met earlier that evening had told them that there was not a German in the village, but that six *polizai* had arrived from the district centre and were at the house of Malchikov, chairman of the Novaya Zhizn kolkhoz. The women there had been busy since early morning baking pies, making meat jelly and cooking liver, which indicated that there would be celebrating that night.

"What kolkhoz? How can there be a kolkhoz under the Germans? You're talking rot, man!" Terentiev, the land-reclamation engineer, said.

The peasant swore that the Germans had kept the kolkhoz. They had put out a slogan, "Commune without Soviets", and made Malchikov sign a "papier" that the commune would work exclusively for the needs of great Germany. Malchikov had had no choice but to obey the order. The peasant's fondness of the German word "papier" at once got him nicknamed Uncle Papier.

"So you're working for the fascists?" Tsvetkov asked him. "Trying hard for your country's enemies?"

Uncle Papier plunged into muddled and incoherent explanations, breathing into Tsvetkov's face the foul and sweetish reek of recently drunk moonshine. He relapsed into a frightened silence when the commander turned away, refusing to hear him out.

When they neared the village proper Tsvetkov ordered Papier to lead the way to the chairman's house. The peasant suddenly stopped and began singing Malchikov's praises, but this was not the time or place for talking, and feeling the cold muzzle of the submachine-gun touch his unshaved chin, he turned and quickly led the way through backalleys to the house where the *polizeis* were feasting. It was a brick building. Before the war the Novaya Zhizn had the reputation of being a prosperous kolkhoz, and its chairman had been awarded an order. Looking in at the lace-curtained windows, it was both strange and painful to see there those *polizeis*, appointed by the agents of the German Reich, to watch them drinking and eating, bastards who had betrayed their Soviet state, their Motherland, and their fathers' graves.

"No more talking!" Tsvetkov ordered. "Pass down my orders. Babichuk, Telegin and Tsedunko come here. Terentiev, watch this Papier man. Ustimenko, where are you?"

"Here," Volodya answered.

Papier tried again to say something, and clutched at Terentiev's sleeve, but the latter pushed him away. The wet snowstorm grew heavier, and only the lighted windows of the chairman's house showed through the thick white veil.

Tsvetkov was the first to mount the high, snow-covered porch.

He kicked open first the unlocked front door and then the door into the living room, was momentarily dazzled by the bright light of the paraffin lamp, and then looking at the *polizeis*, all of whom wore arjn bands, said slowly and calmly, spacing out the words: "Happy holiday to you."

"To you too," replied an elderly moustached *polizei*, a big man who was beginning to run to fat, swivelling round in his chair. "That is, of course, if you mean it."

Their eyes met, and in that fraction of a second the elderly man understood what was going to happen. He pulled his gun out of his pocket with his right hand, and shouted: "Don't shoot, listen, wait!"

He wanted to say more, but Tsvetkov was not the sort to listen and wait. There came a long burst of fire from his trophy Schmeisser gun, he fired it from the hip the way the fascists did it.

In the next room a woman screamed, and a baby began to cry piercingly.

The *polizeis* dashed towards the chest where their guns lay piled, but halfway there stopped dead: Tsedunko, Babichuk and Telegin had their submachine-guns trained on them from the three smashed windows.

"So we're celebrating, are we?" Tsvetkov asked, coming closer to the festively served table. "Celebrating October Revolution Day, are we?"

"What have you done, God damn you!" Sobbed an elderly man in a belted blouse and striped necktie. "D'you know whom you have killed?"

Volodya's heart cringed and simultaneously he thought: something irreparable and disastrous has happened, but what? He did not know. Obeying only this feeling of irreparable disaster, he pushed Tsvetkov aside with his shoulder, and giving no thought to his personal safety bent over the moustached *polizei*. The man was dying. Blood was gushing from his head wound into the untouched dish of meat jelly.

The woman was still screaming somewhere quite close, and the baby was still crying.

"Hands up!" said Tsvetkov.

The five *polizeis* obeyed. The man in the belted blouse, probably Malchikov the chairman, rushed to the dying man, grabbed him by the shoulders and tried to lift him up on to the table, but at that moment old Romanyuk kicked him aside and sticking the muzzle of his submachine-gun into his belly, snarled: "I'll kill you before you can squeak!"

The last, cruel spasm convulsed the dying man, the dish of meat jelly crashed to the floor, and the woman's and the baby's screams stopped at once.

"Take everyone outside!" Tsvetkov shouted shrilly. "Let's finish this show!"

"Oh you murderers, what have you done!" Volodya heard to his right. "Whom have you killed, you damned murderers!"

He turned round: there, in the doorway, stood the woman who had screamed. She wore a shiny green dress and was holding a curly-haired baby in her arms. Tears poured from her eyes and she was saying something. Babichuk gave the youngest of the *polizei* a shove, and ordering him to get a move on said: "*Bitte*."

The man looked at him in surprise.

"But we're Russians, have you all gone mad?"

And then another, horrible thing happened: Telegin, that great clown and joker, turning pale with rage, fired point-blank into the young *polizei*'s face. Hissing strangely like a punctured balloon, the man remained upright for a minute, and then slowly fell against the friend who stood beside him--a young fellow in glasses with red hair standing up in a tuft at the back of his head.

"What for? What are you doing, Telegin?" Volodya demanded furiously.

"It was for calling himself a Russian," Telegin answered. "He hasn't the right, comrade doctor."

"Comrades, listen!" Cried the young fellow in glasses. "Comrades, you've got to listen to me!"

"You asking for a bullet too?" Telegin said with an ugly grin. "We're no comrades of yours, traitor! Get outside."

They were led past Volodya. Malchikov was taken outside too. The woman in the rustling bright green dress ran after him, pushing her way in between her husband and the ashen-faced Tsedunko who knew, as well as everyone else, including these *polizei* themselves, where they were taking them and what they would do to them. And Volodya was also aware of the imminence of what would take place, but at the same time he felt with all his heart that it could not, must not take place. He was determined that it would not take place while he, Ustimenko, was alive.

When they had led all of them out of the room where the two dead men lay, they hesitated, not knowing how to carry out the rest. A slanting, wet snow was falling, and in that snow stood Papier, shaking miserably in every limb. The woman, holding the baby in her arms, rushed to him, and Volodya called out to her, hardly knowing what he was saying: "You mustn't! D'you hear? The child will catch cold! It's cold out here..."

The light from the window illuminated her insanely staring eyes, and as in a nightmare Volodya heard her shouting to Papier: "Tell them, tell them! They don't know! Tell them about Stephan, tell them, Roman!"

"But they won't listen," he said in a breaking voice. "D'you think they'd listen? They're not Red Army men at all. Would they have done this if they were?"

"Come with me a minute," Volodya said quietly to Tsvetkov, and taking him down the steps asked quickly: "Did you hear what he said?"

"Are you getting scared of a bit of blood?" Tsvetkov asked him as quickly. "Of the horrors of war? Pitying the traitors?"

"I'm not pitying anyone," Volodya hissed in a towering rage, losing all control of himself. "I'll have no pity for you either if you dare discredit the noble idea of partisan warfare. I'll have no pity for you because it's abuse of power shooting people blindly without finding anything out about them."

Realising that this was no way to persuade Tsvetkov in his blind rage, Volodya tried cunning.

"Supposing they know something we could use?" he asked. "What then? They must know what's going on in their neighbourhood, their district. After all, we've got further to go, haven't we?"

Tsvetkov thought this over in silence, and then ordered his men to take the prisoners, including Papier and the woman, to the village Soviet.

"There is no such thing as a village Soviet now," the young *polizei* in glasses said calmly and bitterly. "It's been turned into a hostel for visiting agents of the *Kreislandwirt* who lord it over the whole district."

"Well, that's exactly where we shall go," Tsvetkov said without animosity.

The *polizei*s were interrogated separately by Tsvetkov, Terentiev, Kholodilin and Volodya, who got the young fellow in glasses.

"Have a cigarette," Volodya said in the tone of an experienced investigator, holding out his packet to the prisoner.

"I prefer to smoke my own," he replied hostilely.

The room seemed unbearably hot and stuffy to Volodya after all those days and nights in the open. He tugged at the neck of his sweater that was heavy with perspiration.

"How did you come to this?" he asked, not knowing how to begin.

"Why should I answer your questions?" came the prisoner's surprising reply. "Who are you to question me?"

"What do you mean?"

"Just that. There's all sorts of scum roaming the forests nowadays, and there are deserters among them too..."

"But look here..."

"And also nationalists of various hues," the man continued, peering at Volodya short-sightedly through his thick lenses. "The German command uses them rather cleverly..."

"You mean you don't believe that we are partisans?"

"Just now any ten deserters will call themselves partisans in a pinch, as glibly as they'll tell the Germans that they are looking for someone to give themselves up to."

"Yes, but we..." Volodya said haltingly.

"Yes but you," the prisoner imitated him spitefully and bitterly. "You exploited our Andrei Filipovich's kindness, his trustfulness. He thought you were our own people and wasn't quick enough, and you murdered him! You murdered him!" he shouted. "You just went and murdered him because he always believed in people first, he believed your commander and took him for one of us, and you don't kill your own people just like that!"

"You must believe me," Volodya suddenly begged in a low voice. "Try to believe me or we'll never get anywhere. Look, a document, any document might deceive one, but the way we two are now there can be no deceit. I have no documents, no password or any other proof like that, and you haven't either. There are just you and me—two Soviet men, or so I suppose. So I hope," he amended. "I am confident that it is so. And we've met with trouble, misfortune, disaster. Well, let's talk it over."

"Let's," the young fellow agreed in a voice as low as Volodya's. "But it's too late now."

"Why too late?"

"Because Andrei Filipovich and Tolya Krivtsov are dead. No talking can bring them back..."

"Listen," Volodya said. "After all, you are wearing a *polizei's* arm band. You will agree that it isn't so simple."

"No, it isn't," he said wearily. "Nothing is simple in our life. It's only when you're at the Young Pioneer age that everything looks so easy and simple, and even then not to all boys and

girls. . . . In short, we've been put on this job by the underground. You may have heard that our Party is working actively in regions temporarily occupied by the fascist invaders, and that Soviet power continues to exist there."

"I know," Volodya nodded, remembering Aunt Aglaya's parting words. "I have heard, naturally. . . ."

"That's something at any rate," the young fellow said mockingly. "Well then. . . ."

He was still trying to roll himself a cigarette, but his fingers would not obey him.

"Well then. . . . I neither intend to tell you nor do I see any need to tell you exactly what our job was, but anyway we—a few of us Komsomol members—were placed under the command of our old schoolteacher, Andrei Filipovich, who had supposedly suffered at the hands of our authorities when the war broke out. It was a fiction, of course. But the fascists gladly enlisted his services, they trusted him implicitly, and he picked us. Tolya Krivtsov, whom you have murdered, was his liaison with the underground. Now, at least do you begin to understand what you have done?"

Drops of sweat stood out on Volodya's forehead.

"You do? The hero partisans! Do you see what happens when a bunch of self-styled avengers meddles in what is no business of theirs, when a lot of bright sparks take the law into their own hands before finding anything out. . . ."

"Look, we're not that," Volodya flared up. "We're not enjoying this either. . . ."

"And who is enjoying anything nowadays? Who? Ha, they're not enjoying it, they're highly strung! They shot Andrei Filipovich just like that, because they're highly strung, they killed our Tolya because they can't bear to hear the word Russian from the lips of a *polizei*! Oh, the poor dears, they're not enjoying it! Oh, they've been tiring themselves out with work!"

His lips quivered, his face suddenly looked like a small boy's, and, sobbing, he spoke with such desperate anguish, that Volodya's heart turned over.

"A bunch of bloody idiots with Schmeissers! Heroes out of a cheap melodrama. Stinking fools! We just got started, we were doing so well, we'd have. . . ."

The door swung inwards, crashing back against the wall, and in walked Tsvetkov with a grimace of despair congealed on his chalk-white face.

"Sorokin, I understand everything," he spoke rapidly and inarticulately to the weeping boy. "I take the entire blame, I'll answer for my actions, I'm prepared to face court-martial, but just now we've got to go, the fascists may descend on us, and my men are not to blame for my imbecility, I have no right to risk their lives. You'll come with us, of course, you have no choice. . . ."

"Yes we have!" said Sorokin, his short-sighted, tear-filled eyes fixed balefully on Tsvetkov's white face. "It's our duty to stay here. After this stupid raid the Germans will trust us even more, and we must make the fullest use of their trust. And it's not for you to relieve us, it's not you who sent us here, it's not you who put us on this nightmare of a job. . . ."

He blew his nose for some minutes, choking with tears, then he polished his glasses with his handkerchief, and turning his face away said:

"What are we going to do without Andrei Filipovich? What? There's not another Communist among us, do you understand that? We've no contact now either, just try making contact again. . . ."

"You will," Volodya put in quietly. "If your organisation is as strong as you say, the underground will certainly find you and get in touch with you. Besides, Sorokin, you just told me yourself that the Germans will trust you even more now. . . ."

"It's they who will arrange Andrei Filipovich's funeral!" Sorokin cried, appalled. "Can't you understand? They'll bury him as *their* hero, they'll make a great show of it, and our people will spit with loathing and call him a Judas!"

Hanging his proud head, and hunching his shoulders, Tsvetkov strode out of the room— he had nothing to say.

"Shoot me through the arm or something," Sorokin told Volodya in a matter-of-fact voice. "After all, I couldn't have come through without a scratch on me. You can do that much, at least. Something's got to be done about the others too, in case some bastard squeals about our chatting here with you. . . . Only don't shoot to kill. . . ."

"I'm a doctor, I studied anatomy," Volodya replied surlily.

At daybreak, the flying detachment was already a long way from Belopolye—fifteen kilometres or so. They marched in silence, with drooping heads and heavy hearts. By now all of them knew the tragic details of that tragic raid. Tsvetkov marched

ahead, his eyes on the ground, his hands deep in the pockets of his raglan. He did not utter a single word, and when it grew quite light Volodya was alarmed to see how haggard his face was and how parched his lips had become overnight.

"I'm all mixed up, Ustimenko," Tsvetkov broke the silence at last, sitting down on some logs at the abandoned sawmill where they were making a halt. Wearily he stretched out his legs. "I'm hopelessly mixed up. I don't know if I have the right to live after murdering that comrade. I've got to face the truth: I killed a Communist, an underground agent. I killed him guided by my intuition, by my ability to spot a traitor and turncoat at a glance. . . ."

"You're blaming your intuition," Volodya interrupted him in a quiet voice. "You're calling yourself names for trusting your sight! But I also had nothing but my sight, or intuition if you like, when I stood up for them. No, I think, it's not that. . . ."

"What is not that?" Tsvetkov asked irritably.

"You see, Tsvetkov—and you can do all the swearing you like, of course—but you see, I absolutely could not believe that there was treason afoot there. It's stupid of me, I suppose, but when I see a youngster in glasses, with hair standing up in a funny tuft, I just can't. Do you understand? I want irrefutable proof, and no *intellect* of yours will influence me. *I believe too strongly in my Soviet state* to suspect people of treason straight off. . . ."

"You have begun to speak in italics, I see," Tsvetkov sneered. "On the whole it's very beautiful of course: dirt won't soil the righteous, it's true, but life is life. . . ."

Volodya shuddered visibly. "I hate this little formula," he said. "People always resort to it to explain away the shabby and the vile."

"In other words, Volodya, you don't believe in treason as such? In the possibility of treason?"

"I don't know," Volodya said pensively. "At any rate not in treason the way you see it. The minute I saw those *polizeis* I thought, there was something fishy there."

"From their fishy expressions?"

"I wish you wouldn't joke about it! In the present case, truth is not on your side, not by a long shot, and you should remember it."

"Meaning the small-scale Napoleon?"

"That too," Volodya agreed glumly. "You ought to watch yourself in this respect."

"Why bother? There's always you to put me in my place."

"Sometimes one can't. For instance when you get carried away by your commander's vanity. It's just this once that one can talk to you, and only because there's been trouble, a disaster, while at other times it's speak when you're spoken to..."

"But, after all, I am the commander!"

"Yes, a Soviet commander!" Volodya said, looking sternly into Tsvetkov's eyes. "That's an important point. And precisely because it is, if I were you I'd talk to the men about what happened."

Tsvetkov shivered as from cold and said: "You are right about some things. Unfortunately, it was my mistaken notion that in battle everything was plain and straightforward."

"Most probably it is in battle. The mistake here was in our not scouting first and making sure. Or more correctly, our not bothering to do any scouting at all."

"All right," Tsvetkov nodded.

He told Romanyuk to call everyone.

The speech he addressed to the men was strong, uncompromising and brilliant. Not that he condemned or humbled himself. He put it clearly and accurately: "Because I failed to take many things into account, and never hoped or even dreamed we'd find our own people there, I, your commander, am guilty of causing a great disaster. With all my strength, and my blood if need be, I shall try to atone for my unintentional crime, and I give you my word of honour that nothing like that will ever happen again..."

The gathering then had a thorough discussion of all that had happened. It transpired that Roman, or Uncle Papier, had tried to explain the situation to Kholodilin, but had been cursed into silence. For that Kholodilin was given a reprimand. Old Romanyuk, being an experienced soldier, was also due for a dressing down. At the conclusion of the meeting it was Ivan T'legin who took the floor.

"Comrades!" he said. "By the time I get back home, my baby girl Masha will have grown a little older, and she'll ask me innocently: 'Daddy, tell me how you fought the dirty fascists.' And what will I tell her, my good comrades? That I murdered Tolya Krivtsov, our Komsomol boy? Or what?"

"Don't fret too much, Ivan my lad," Babichuk told him. "You're not very likely to live to that day. War's a long, long business, brothers."

The men laughed with grim humour, and broke up. Tsvetkov huddled in his corner, complaining of the cold. Closing his eyes he said: "By and large it's the vagaries of war." And then added: "Not badly put, that about his daughter Masha. On the whole, though, when you come to think of it it's best not to make such stories public. There's no educational value in them. And it's best for all the Mashas in the world not to know them."

"No, let them know!" Volodya said, frowning. "And understand them thoroughly."

"What for?"

"So people like you will think twice before killing anyone."

"But what if those men really had been traitors?"

"Do you mean to say you haven't renounced your standpoint?"

"I shall repeat my question, Ustimenko: supposing those men really had been traitors?"

"Then they should have been tried and shot."

"But this is wartime, you know."

"There's such a thing as court-martial, or so I have heard."

Tsvetkov closed his eyes again and seemed to fall into a doze, and Volodya walked away to Terentiev, who, comfortably reclining on a bed of wood shavings, was explaining to his listeners why he personally was in a good mood in spite of all they had been through.

"True, it was a bad business of course," he was saying. "It was bad, terrible. Ivan Telegin, for one, is feeling really bad," with a nod he indicated Telegin who sat slumped against the rotting wall. "But it was a lesson to us. The commander did right to criticise himself, he did right to tell us that the old drunk, Uncle Roman or Papier, tried to speak up and we didn't let him. . . ."

"I didn't let him!" Tsvetkov shouted angrily. "I didn't let him!"

"You didn't," Terentiev continued in a lower key: "Yes, it was a hard lesson. I remember reading in some book or other when I was very young that partisan warfare is a great cause, while partisan adventuring is a bad thing. And in this case it was partisan adventuring on our part. But I'll tell you why personally I'm in such a good mood nonetheless. Because I saw with my own eyes that our pals are alive and kicking. Here on the Uncha, in the enemy's rear our underground is alive, it's having a hard time, but it does exist. And I saw that our land belongs

to us, even though it's occupied by the enemy. In future, of course, we must co-ordinate our actions. . . ."

"It's true, what you say is true, only on the march it's rather difficult sometimes for us to co-ordinate our actions." Tsvetkov spoke calmly enough, yet not without a hint of irony. "There are the swamps, you know, and then our lack of experience in such matters. . . ."

"The swamps will freeze," Terentiev replied. "They have frozen a little already, and our inexperience is a thing of the past. We were taught a good lesson, we'll not forget it in a hurry. What's more, I have a suggestion to make: let me go and scout, I'll look around and maybe scent out something worthwhile, pick up their trail."

"All right, we'll think it over. And now let's get a bit of sleep." Tsvetkov told the men.

They took it easy on the holiday, November 7th, and early on the 8th Terentiev started for Shchetinino, to try and establish contact with the underground, to scent out, as he put it, someone dependable, a farmer who could be trusted, and then meet the detachment at the Vysokoye Rest Home, regarding which Tsvetkov had some hopeful information. Terentiev was quite sure that Malchikov, the chairman of the kolkhoz, and Sorokin, would help; it couldn't be otherwise. "And if something goes wrong, why, people even get killed in war," he said with a grin, shaking hands with Tsvetkov. "War is that sort of business, you know."

He looked an ordinary civilian, an elderly, very tired man with not an identification paper on him. At daybreak, he and Tsvetkov invented a suitable biography for him, keeping as close to the truth as possible: his name and profession remained his own, he had been imprisoned for black market deals by Soviet punitive organs, had escaped during an air raid, and had since been roaming the forest, terrified of landing in prison again.

"But what if they give you the third degree?" Tsvetkov asked.

"My heart is pretty lousy. Their fun won't last long," Terentiev said with a smile.

He shook hands gravely with everyone, and went on his way.

Volodya watched him out of sight. Something told him that he would never again see those pale, faded eyes, that sunburnt, finely lined face, and never again hear his rather hollow voice, his peculiar accent with the pronounced o's.

I Want To Be a Double Bass

Dear V. A.,

Yevgeny—my successful and gallant brother—called when passing through. He told me that he had seen a certain Professor Barinov, and from this professor had learnt about the fix you had been in, in that place where you are now. We know all the details, mind you, including how you behaved in the isolation hospital when you more or less knew it was all up with you. These are not my words, they're Prof. Barinov's. Heavens above, why do I mince and simper, the letter will never reach you or even the mail box, so why can't I write what I truly feel? You were sure you had the plague, weren't you? It was only later that it proved to be nothing more alarming than scarlet fever.

Do you know, even Yevgeny was thrilled and he described all your experiences to me with admiration. Quite sincere, too. By the way, he does have a faculty for admiring and for feeling moved by the feats of others, and to suffer when watching a drama on the stage. Do you know, I've noticed that people with a cowardly, mean little soul, just like very cruel people, are prone to display precisely this sort of sentimentality when watching a play or a film, or wherever feeling does not cost them much. Whereas with really kind people, as a rule, it is not the portrayal of sufferings or feats that moves them; they help the suffering by deed, they themselves perform feats but do not treat their own actions with reverence. How's that? I'm not as big a fool as you imagined, Volodya dear, at the last stage of our relations.

Oh, how frightened I was listening to Yevgeny!

And do you know how he told it?

As if it were a movie, with you the ideal young hero!

And the underlying meaning or the unspoken lines, as our comrades of the theatre say, ran as follows: "That's the sort of catch you let escape, Varya. With time, Ustimenko will become famous, a world celebrity, and what are you?" Well, naturally I listened and cried. And not because I let that fine catch escape, I don't give a hang for all the fine catches in the world, but simply because I felt terribly afraid for you, though rather late in the day. And then what are those fantastic tales about someone taking a shot at you and you forgiving him, and him coming to worship you afterwards? Volodya my own, maybe on top of all your troubles you've become converted to Tolstoi's

philosophy and have given up eating the carcasses of slaughtered animals, for all living creatures hallow the Lord's name? Anything might happen to you. Why, two hundred years or so ago, fanatics like you ended by burning themselves to death, I've been to see *Khovanshchina* so I know.

My dearest beloved dear!

If you only knew how I miss you.

If only you could understand, my poor obsessed dear, how impossible it is for me to ever fall in love with anyone else because I'm a one-man woman. If you knew, my silly idiot, how cruelly, because of some trifling nonsense, because of your intolerance, you have deprived me forever of the joy of being loved, and of loving you not in your absence but in your presence, of fighting with you over trifles, of feeling hurt by you and then happy because we made it up, of getting dolled up and going out with you, say, to the theatre, and being able to say to you: "Oh, Volodya, aren't you hopeless, you've twisted your necktie into a rope again!" You deprived me of the joy of sewing on a button for you, frying a pan of potatoes for you, of waiting for you, simply being completely happy because I'm waiting for you and you must come, because if you don't come it means that you have died, since there can be no other reason.

But, naturally, none of this will ever be.

You already have a girl there, her name is Tush, Yevgeny explained it all to me in a voice loaded with implications. She's beautiful, an exotic beauty, of course, so said Yevgeny. To which I replied with an inane giggle.

"I'm better than all his Tushes, whatever you say! And he won't get away from me in the end, that famous Ustimenko of yours. He'll come to me on his bended knees, but I'll send him away!"

That's a line out of a play. I had to speak it with a laugh but at the same time "through tears" as in Chekhov, you know. He often has it "through tears"—although others can't see the tears anyway. Yevgeny didn't either, of course. And then he began to brag about his "career." His "old fossil" dotes on him, and being attached to a lieutenant-general in wartime is not a thing given to all men. The "old fossil" has tantrums, of course, but Yevgeny has long got used to his moods, and he knows just from the way in which the general taps his cigarette on the lid of his cigarette-case what sort of mood he is in and whether he got out on the wrong side of the bed that morning. Why do I

keep on about Yevgeny, wouldn't you rather hear about me and how I dreamed of being a double bass?

Well, the boys and we, girls, got into our bus. The boys are our string quintet, a very good one, by the way. The moment we got in an air raid began. Our art manager, who was shepherding us, suddenly forgot what he was supposed to say, you know how it is. He had to say "disperse", and instead he said, as if he were playing cards: "reshuffle".

No one knew what he meant, of course. Fat Nastya replied from the window of the bus: "We've already reshuffled, and are quite comfortable now."

Well, we arrived at the anti-aircraft unit. We got into white lab coats to play one act from *Professor Mamlock*.

Just as we started it began to rain.

There we were playing *Professor Mamlock* in pouring rain.

We were thinking: "It doesn't matter about us, but what about the musical instruments. They can't stand rain, and we've left the cases in the bus, three or four kilometres away. They'll be ruined!"

And then, Volodya dear, I saw a sailor, an anti-aircraft gunner, take off his blue collar and drape it over the double bass that someone had stood up against a tree. Another sailor did the same, then a third, a fourth, a fifth. . . .

It was then I thought: I want to be a double bass! I want it to occur to you to protect me from the rain with your blue collar. And after that, let fate do its worst!

Volodya, please, please wrap your blue collar round me one day when it rains!

Would you like to hear about a certain jolly little island?

You believe that nobody needs us at all, that we've all betrayed you, as you put it in your letter, after running away from me in such a despicable way, you hateful creature!

So take this, Volodya boy!

I'll tell it in the third person for a change.

They (we actors, that is) were anything but utterly fearless people. They were as frightened as everyone else, and more than the others because they were new to the war and did not understand that which the scamen, fighting in this war from the first day, had learnt and had become used to.

The enemy fired at our all-star team while we were still at sea. They fired at us and drove our launch on to the shallows. And then one of the actresses—Varya Stepanova—heard a sailor

pronounce in a sonorous voice as he took off his clothes to get into the water: "What a peach of a target we make for the Fritzes! Only complete bunglers couldn't sink our launch within the hour!"

The Germans turned out to be bunglers and did not sink us.

Everyone on that island came out to meet us, but the minute we landed we were ordered to run to the air-raid shelter.

And then the day's schedule was read out to us: 4 p.m. the enemy treats the island to a "show". 6 p.m. the island gives an answering "show" for the enemy. 8 p.m. our team puts on a show, without inverted commas, for the islanders.

Having finished reading this out to us, the lieutenant stroked the black moustache adorning his boyish lip, and asked: "Is everything clear?"

"Everything!" replied the actors.

"Any questions?"

We had none. A few minutes later, shells began to burst on the bare little island, already burnt out by enemy fire. It seemed that everything would be finished forever. And the sea would come rolling over the land.

But nothing of the sort happened.

Our team drank beer and ate bread and butter. Our art manager smiled the smile of a martyr, not because of fear, he was used to the war by now, but because he had hoped there might be a dentist there who'd put an end to his misery, he had periostitis or some such thing. But the dentist had been killed by a splinter the day before.

At 6 p.m. the island opened fire.

That was their "show".

And at 8 p.m. sharp, we began *our* show in the air-raid shelter.

No theatre company in the world, not even the best, had ever scored such a success. Afterwards, the lieutenant with the moustache showed Varya Stepanova and the other girls, but Varya mainly, how to move under artillery fire.

"Forty five seconds elapse from the moment you hear the *first* sound to the actual bursting of the shell. It's an enormous length of time. It's infinity. In that space of time, Comrade Stepanova, you can not only hide behind a boulder but you can choose the most suitable boulder behind which to hide. As you walk along, train yourself to look about for a place to throw yourself down. Once you have passed that spot look for the next one. And so on to the one after that."

"If it's as simple as all that, why do people get killed then?" Varya wanted to know.

"Bad luck, we call it." The lieutenant told her sulkily.

At first the actors and actresses were led by the hand and simply pushed down behind a boulder at the critical moment. Our huge Nastya, whom we call a "sentimental tank", hit back every time she got a shove. "I didn't mean to," she would be all contrition afterwards. "It's because I'm so awfully strong, and I can't give in at the very first push. It's quite awkward, being so strong, I mean. . . ."

On our fourth day there, our art manager, still nursing his tooth and huddling in a dark corner, overheard the two island commanders talking not very cheerfully. He missed most of the conversation, but they ended up by saying something like this:

"Why on top of everything else did those theatre people have to come here? What are we to do with them? Honestly, it's enough to make a man weep!"

Our art manager, whom they took for a pile of padded jackets, army coats and cape-tents heaped on the floor, now lisped: "Really, what are you going to do with us?"

"Can you shoot?"

"Sort of."

"You mean you can't. Can you throw hand grenades?"

"We did in the play *Here Come the Sailors*. Wooden ones, props, you know. . . ."

The commanders exchanged looks. Early next morning the naval chief, I mean the young lieutenant with the moustache, took all of us actors and actresses into a copse.

"Stepanova!"

"Present."

"We have no time to practise with blanks, this grenade is a live one, understand?"

"I do. . . ."

"Here you are then. After you've thrown back the catch don't loosen your hold on it or you'll get a shock—it won't wait for love or money! Throw it as far as you can and hurl yourself to the ground in double quick time."

Numb with fear, Varya Stepanova threw the grenade with the blankety-blank catch, but it was a sissy throw, not nearly far enough. Everyone flopped behind boulders, and the splinters fell quite near. Not one of the team did well. And now, the lieutenant, knitting his brow, made a short "graduation" speech.

"Comrades actors and actresses," he said. "In your case, hand grenades will be purely defensive weapons, but even so you must remember, when resorting to them, that with your technique a hand grenade is equally dangerous for yourselves as for the enemy." And then he added after a moment's reflection: "But resort to them just the same! It'll mean your killing one enemy at least and not falling into the fascists' hands alive!"

But we didn't have a chance to "resort" to them. That night, the commander found a way of getting us across to the mainland. We parted silently, not a word was spoken. It was perfectly quiet, there was only the rustle of the waves lapping the sandbank. All those who came to see us off stood lined up on the beach, and when our launch cast off they saluted those leaving them forever.

The girls wept quietly, and Nastya the "sentimental tank" sobbed for all she was worth. And then our boys, the string quintet, got their instruments out of their cases, and suddenly a melody so beautiful, so kind, so human, courageous and powerful, lovelier perhaps than any music ever heard in this wilderness before, floated over the grey sea, the scorched and shell-ravaged little island, over the helmets of the seamen who had come to bid us farewell. . . . And you, Vladimir Afanasyevich, have you ever heard a Bach fugue? You haven't? So I thought.

With a soldier's best wishes,

Yours,

Varya Stepanova.

How I wish I could end my letter to you like that, and to keep entirely to the subject of war and what good pals you and I are. But I can't. Cover me with your sailor's collar, Volodya my own, I so terribly want to be a double bass in the rain.

I'll be writing to you again soon.

And don't you imagine that you're the only one doing a useful job in this world.

I'll also have you know that the lieutenant with the moustache, the one who showed me how to throw those blasted hand grenades, fell in love with me and told me so. And by the way, he's handsome, intelligent and brave.

But there are no letters from him.

Why do such men have to die? You Volodya who know everything, explain this to me, will you?

A la Guerre Comme a la Guerre !

Tsvetkov did not permit himself to grow lax even after those horrible happenings in Belopolyc: as before, he shaved every morning with his old, blunted blades; as before, he smelt of eau de Cologne; as before, he used the expression "There's everything in Greece!"; as before, he demanded from the "supply officer", the meek and mild Kopytov, that he must never give the fighters plain hot water for breakfast but always a chicory brew at least, and that meat must not be cooked without some substitute for salt, even if it was only sorrel or some "acidic stuff" from Volodya's medicine chest.

His face became leaner, his eyes under the winglike brows sank deeper in their hollows, he appeared unwell. But he kept a grip on himself until what happens to splendid, thoroughbred horses happened to him: he went down, and stayed down. A handsome stallion falls suddenly, seemingly by accident, but he cannot get up. His hoofs still scrape the cobbles with the horse-shoes cutting sparks, his slender neck pulsates, his nostrils flare out, but death has already stolen up on him. He will not get on to his slim, strong legs again. It is the end. . . .

It was thus with Tsvetkov: suddenly he felt he could not stand up. He shaved sitting down, doing it far more slowly than usual, and drank half a mugful of chicory brew. But when he tried to stand up, his polished boots slipped and he fell on his side awkwardly, onto the heap of dirty straw that was his bed. Cursing in a hollow, smothered voice, he tried to turn his body into a more comfortable position and almost stood up erect in the attempt, but then collapsed. He fell face down, arms flung out, as though shot through the heart when running. Kholodilin, who happened to be there, rushed to him, fumbled for his pulse, and not finding it shouted: "Comrades! The Commander is dead!"

Ustimenko came quickly, undid the resisting hook on the coat, found the madly racing pulse, and took Tsvetkov's temperature: it was 103.

"My orders were to shoot the lagging. I must be shot." Tsvetkov said, fighting for breath.

"Don't talk rot!" Ustimenko muttered.

"Give me my gun!" Tsvetkov demanded. "Miserable cowards! I'll do it myself. Get going, everyone! Romanyuk's to be commander. . . ."

They kept his gun out of his reach. When they made their next halt at a burnt down hulling mill, Romanyuk ordered fires to be lighted in a ring, and then Volodya and Tsedunko lay their commander down in the centre of that blazing, hot circle, stripped him, and Volodya pressed his ear to the powerful chest. The men stood in a close circle inside the ring of fires, and in the smoke and the flying sparks waited to hear the diagnosis. However, Volodya was unable to tell them exactly. The symptoms pointed to double membranous pneumonia, and the case was very acute.

"Will he die?" asked Tclegin.

Volodya shrugged his shoulders.

"We can't stop here," Romanyuk said glumly. "The place is no good, we'd all be killed here for nothing. We've got to move on and carry him. . . ."

They put him on crudely made stretchers—a big, heavy man, restless in fever, tossing and thrashing about in delirium—and bore him through the forest thickets along slippery paths throughout the dark November night. A raw, piercing wind bruising faces with lashings of wet snow howled in the treetops without a pause. The mud squelched under their broken boots, their blistered feet bled and more blisters burst on their heels. Many of the men dragged themselves along at an unhuman pace—crawling like crabs, groaning, and all but sobbing, yet drag themselves along they did, as though fearing that he, their commander, might turn round and shoot the lagging as he had once threatened to do. Though almost dead, he remained the commander. They listened anxiously to his rasping breathing, expecting him to give them a wise, clear-cut order.

"He'll be all right," they said to one another.

"He fell ill from brooding. It's no joke, killing one of your own."

"Always alone with his thoughts. Kept them inside."

"What he needs is a bed."

"If his mind was clear, if he wasn't senseless, he'd find himself a bed. He always gets what he sets out to get."

"God, how he grinds his teeth, he grinds them and grinds them. . . ."

"If he'd only come to for a minute, he'd know what to do."

They built a shelter for the night in a gully where the wind was less fierce. They dug a hole the size and depth of two graves, lowered the stretcher with Tsvetkov into it, and stationed Usti-

menko beside him with a German lantern and his medicine chest. Next, they quickly built a low shed over the hole to keep the snow and the wind out. Having made Tsvetkov comfortable and tucked him in warmly, Volodya lay down with his hands locked behind his head, and was just falling into a doze when the commander spoke to him in a weak, angry voice.

"How many days has it been?"

"Since you fell ill, you mean?"

"Yes."

"Six, I suppose. . . ."

"You mean they've been carrying me all that time?"

Volodya said nothing to this.

"I've been haunted by that man Malchikov all the six days," Tsvetkov said. "The kolkhoz chairman. The way he. . . ."

He was short of breath and could not go on. He remained silent for such a long time that Volodya was sure he had fallen asleep, but suddenly he spoke again.

"He's just a peasant, but d'you know what he said to me, Volodya? It was a verse from the *Internationale*."

"Which verse?"

"No saviour from on high deliver, . . . No trust have we in prince or peer. . . . We with our strong right hand shall shiver chains of hatred, of greed and fear. . . ."

"Well?"

"And you, he said to me, you and your heroics . . . you would give us deliverance . . . murdering our. . . ."

"Kostya, don't," Volodya said quietly. "Please stop it. You must not think about it now."

In the dank, clammy gloom of their shelter, Volodya found Tsvetkov's wrist and took his pulse. It was not too encouraging. Towards morning, Tsvetkov became unconscious once more, and when they started on the march again, he thrashed about violently, muttering incoherently in his delirium as if commanding an operation.

It was almost dusk when they came out to the railway line Smorodintsy-Shustovo. Romanyuk was nervous, and seemed unable to make the final decision. He talked things over again and again with the older men first and then with the younger ones. "Our cavalry's gone lame," Volodya heard Babichuk say.

First, scouts were sent out, and a little later Romanyuk himself made a reconnaissance, but no decision was made. Telegin held that the railway line should be crossed by assault, while Simash-

kin, suddenly speaking up in a rheumy, cross voice, said that without Tsvetkov the Germans would slaughter them like so many suckling pigs. And so, getting nowhere, they retreated into the wood, into the cold and damp, for a long, tormenting day.

In those long, dreary hours of idleness, the bracing speech Tsvetkov had made them on the edge of the Vasilkovo forest before starting out seemed in a way to affect them in reverse. Now that their commander lay gravely ill, unable to decide, think and issue orders, a hopeless fear gripped many of the men. In those weeks on the march Tsvetkov had taught them to believe and trust in him entirely, and now, deprived of his stern, imperious voice, they felt helpless, disunited and in disagreement with each another.

And it was in this state of mind that they listened to Romanyuk's more angry than resolute order to start the assault crossing of the railway line at 19:40 that evening. Scouts were sent out again, and the operation seemed safe enough. But at precisely the fixed time, a short train consisting of three sleepers and several platforms went past, creating an anti-climax, and disrupting the men's readiness, so that now they hung back not knowing what to do. Romanyuk passed a new order down the line, but they did not get it properly. And when finally they did move forward, they drew such heavy machine-gun fire from the Germans that they were forced to lie low and then make a long detour along a difficult and unexplored path past Timashi Station, where the Germans were guarding the water tower and where an unequal battle had to be fought again.

Early next morning, in mournful silence, the detachment laid Romanyuk to rest. Babichuk, who was a closer friend of the one-armed cavalryman than the others, made a speech at the open grave, brushing away his tears with his hand, while Volodya, with a set face and clenched jaws, re-bandaged the loudly moaning Nemirovsky, who had a fractured scapula and dislocated shoulder joint. Miroshnikov, a grave and silent man, had a hip wound from an explosive bullet, and the elderly, placid Kislitsin had also been hurt.

"Fetch the sappers' tools, someone," Babichuk said. "What's happened to the shovels?"

When he was through with the burial, he came up to the wounded men.

"Well? Coming back to life or do we bury you too?" He demanded darkly.

"Move on, funeral procession. We'll manage without you," Kislitsin told him.

Tsvetkov was dozing on the stretcher nearby. He started up in his half-sleep, and asked what time it was, as urgently and insistently as if something terribly important, something vital hinged on it. . . .

And again, as on that unfortunate night in Belopolye, snow fell in big, wet flakes; the wind howled in the treetops; it was cold, and it seemed the sun would never come out again to warm the forest, and the exhausted, hungry, frozen men would never get dry again.

"Who are the casualties?" Tsvetkov suddenly asked in a lucid, sharp voice.

"We've just buried Uncle Misha," Volodya replied.

"Romanyuk, you mean?"

"Yes. And there are three wounded."

"So they've killed Uncle Misha. Who are the wounded? Name them."

Volodya did. Tsvetkov asked for a drink of water, and then ordered Ustimenko to take over command. Ivan Telegin and Kopytov who were within earshot, exchanged bewildered looks. Tsvetkov intercepted their glances, spat out a long string of coarse abuse, and told them that he would get up in a few days' time and put things in order, but that in the meantime he'd have no more "idle conferring", "anarchy" or "familiarity" in his detachment.

"Conferring and bickering all day, and that's the result, damn you," he said wearily. "My mind is a bit clearer now, and Ustimenko will act for me for the time being."

He ordered them to move on without wasting any more time.

"Right you are," Volodya nodded.

"The sooner we get to where the men can have a real rest, the better," Tsvetkov said with a sigh, closing his sunken eyes. "There are so many wounded now, too. . . ."

But it was four days after the skirmish at Timashi Station that they had a chance to rest. Telegin, back from his scouting trip, told them happily that the Vysokoye Rest Home was just a little to the south behind the hills. The people there had not seen any Germans, the staff was in full strength, they had enough "grub to burst, and blankets, sheets and pillows. Everything is so sweet and cozy, you want to sit down and play a game of draughts in peace—that's the sort of place it is!"

"But why had they seen no Germans?" Tsvetkov asked testily from where he lay.

He spoke to everyone in a pointedly brusque, somewhat hostile tone, for fear that they might pity him or see how weak he was.

"Because, comrade commander," Telegin replied, coming closer to the stretchers and standing at attention, "probably because the rains have made a complete mess of their mud road, no machines can get through, and a German with no machine under him is like a goat with no horns. . . . And what's more, there's been a landslide, the nurses told me, that buried about two kilometres of road. . . ."

"Who's in charge of the place?"

"I don't know what he's like, I didn't see him. But his name is Veresov. I met his niece, of course, Vera Nikolayevna, a very attractive woman, she's a doctor herself. Got stuck there because of the war. . . ."

They sent Kholodilin out to get more information, and had Kopytov go with him for support. He was a cautious sort who had been around, and had a way with people. The two of them had a talk with the staff and told them to have everything ready to receive a large fighting unit, to start the fire in the bathhouse, cook a meal, and generally "have things done the proper way, the Soviet way, the way it's done in our country". The sisters and nurses got busy at once, hurrying off to make the beds and lay out the pyjamas. . . . Kholodilin reported back to the men waiting in the chilly wind on the fringe of the forest.

"Hope they don't sell us out to the Germans," Tsvetkov said harshly.

"They won't," Kholodilin assured him. "They're our own people, after all."

Volodya stood peering into the hilly, coldly sunlit distance, at the gleaming lead-grey thread of the Yancha—the very same Yancha in which he used to swim when training under Bogoslovsky—and thinking that there were Germans everywhere, that the war would go on for a long time, that his aunt was somewhere in these parts too, and that maybe at that very moment she, too, was gazing at the country trampled upon by enemy boots, and thinking the same thoughts as he. . . .

"There was the signature of their chief fascist boss: Major zu Stakkelberg und Waldeck. . . ." Kholodilin's voice came to Volodya.

"Fancy that!" he said with a chuckle.

Tsvetkov gave him a sour look.

"Friend of yours?" Telegin asked.

"I remember hearing that name years ago," Volodya said reminiscently, recollecting the particulars of that old story. "One of our professors at the medical institute delivered a Frau zu Stakkelberg und Waldeck's baby, it's a funny story about something that happened about forty years ago. Imagine hearing that name again here. It is queer!"

"Another thing that's queer about that rest home is that it's the private property of an emigrant by the name of Voitsekhov-sky," said Kholodilin. "And this Voitsekhovsky person will soon be arriving to put his house in order, so the director was told. They also told him that he, the director, would be held personally responsible if everything was not as it was before. If I remember correctly, the famous airplane-shaped hospital in Chorny Yar formerly belonged to Voitsekhovsky as well, or didn't it?"

"That's right," Volodya said. "I did my practical training there, under Bogoslovsky."

"Must we hear more?" Tsvetkov said irritably. "Wasting breath on reminiscences when we've got to decide what to do next..."

He was in pain again, his eyes had a lost look—the crisis was probably coming. He was obviously the worse for those few hours in which he had tried to take command again.

"Go to it, Ustimenko, use your own judgement..."

With weak hands he pulled the old padded jacket over his face, and lay still.

"Well then, we'll do it this way," Volodya said, suddenly realising that all eyes were turned on him. "This is what we'll do..."

Briefly and in a level voice he gave his instructions, telling them what to do "firstly", "secondly", "thirdly", and so on, if they wanted to get medical treatment for the wounded and a good rest for themselves. He spoke without haste, pausing for thought, and glancing often at Tsvetkov's sleeping form. It seemed to the men that he was speaking not on his own behalf but on the commander's, and therefore everything would be all right, things would go smoothly, "under their own steam" as Ivan Telegin would have said.

"Fall in!" Volodya rapped out the order without knowing why.

"The Rest Home staff are our own Soviet people. Comrades, please be on your best behaviour, be polite and let's forget our rough ways. . . ."

"And how about loving our Soviet nurses?" asked Kolya Pinchuk, a lad from Odessa. "Is that allowed, Comrade Ustimenko? If it's true love, I mean."

In the chilly dusk the detachment approached the freshly painted gates of the Rest Home. Two huge watchdogs—Caucasian sheepdogs—tugged savagely at their chains, growling and barking, frothing at the mouth and splashing white spume on the cold yellow sand. In the front garden, where a large glass ball atop a tall pole sparkled in the rays of the setting sun, stood the ward nurses, wiping away their copious tears of joy on the hems of their white smocks and sighing words of relief and welcome. The housekeeper—a bony, thin-lipped nurse with fallen arches—regarded the men suspiciously, and Volodya thought her eyes were saying: "Don't be too sure of your welcome." The director did not appear at all. "It has nothing to do with me," he had said to Kholodilin earlier that afternoon. He did send his niece out to meet them, though. All Volodya noticed in that first glance was that she was tall, with a good figure, that she had a woolly shawl on her shoulders, and wore her dark hair parted in the middle.

"I see you have some wounded," she said to him in a low, throaty voice as the stretchers were carried past her across the veranda. "I'm a doctor, let me help you. . . ."

He made no reply and shrank away from her because she was so clean compared with them, because the life here was so unlike what theirs had been in the marshes and woods, and because her cloyingly sweet perfume had such a hostile smell.

Tsvetkov was placed on a bed with an innerspring mattress in a big, white, restful and very warm room. Volodya had the wounded placed next door in order to have them all near at hand. However, he was more than the detachment's medical officer now, he was the commander! And so, after taking a quick scrub in the bathhouse and putting on the silly striped flannel pyjamas all the patients had to wear, and belting himself into a robe (his own clothes had been taken away by the ward nurses for something they called "processing"), Volodya made the rounds of the post, checked to see that the telephone connection with the district centre was really broken, talked awhile with Tsedunko, on whom he relied a great deal, and only then

mounted the veranda steps again and walked down the long corridor to his room to become the doctor once more.

He caught a glimpse of his face in the mirror, and involuntarily backed away from the sight. A growth of hair of a nondescript colour covered his cheeks and tapered to a foolish looking point on his chin, the whole reminiscent of an actor in home theatricals; there was a moustache too, or rather a shapeless patch of fuzz which Kolya Pinchuk, who was standing in front of the same mirror, called crude wool. Volodya's eyes, framed in their long, thick eyelashes, travelled over his cheeks and forehead, badly scratched and skinned from pushing through the thickets. His scrutiny took in the whole of his wind-and-snow bruised face and what he saw shocked and disgusted him. He borrowed Pinchuk's razor and began to shave.

"A fellow with my looks could never hope to replace Tsvetkov," he was thinking as, groaning and cursing, he hacked at his beard. "Honestly, with a pan like mine I should be swinging by the tail from a baobab with the other apes in the jungle somewhere."

Pinchuk seemed to be in agreement with Volodya's unspoken thoughts.

"You're a bit less of a sight now," he said. "Except for your hair. Humans don't wear it that way. Shall I trim it for you, comrade doctor? Of course, I'm no barber but. . ."

"All right, go to it," Volodya agreed.

Pinchuk cut his hair in notches first, then he tried to trim it, and finally, in view of the hopelessness of the situation, suggested shaving it all off.

"Go ahead," Volodya said resignedly.

"It doesn't look too bad now, does it?" Pinchuk asked doubtfully. "Only please don't hold it against me, I'm a lathe operator by trade, you know. . ."

Humming an Odessa pop song, he went in search of one of the nurses—a tall, plump girl who had caught his fancy. Volodya, wrapping himself in a blanket like an ancient Roman, started on a tour of inspection of the Rest Home grounds to see how they could best defend themselves in case of unexpected trouble. He was accompanied by Kislitsin, the veteran soldier who walked leaning on a crutch he had made for himself, and a bright lad Ivan Telegin.

In the meantime Vera Veresova, without waiting for his permission, had enlisted the help of the housekeeper and rubbed Tsvetkov down with water-diluted eau de Cologne and changed

him into clean clothes. She was now attending to the other wounded—capably, efficiently and gently, with the experienced gentleness of a physician who has been pining for work and knows that she is being really useful.

"Your Tsvetkov has pneumonia, of course," she said, glancing briefly at Volodya. "The crisis is coming tonight, I think."

Miroshnikov, whose wound she was dressing, cursed in unprintable language from pain, and Kislitsin hastened to make excuses for him.

"He didn't mean any offence, doctor," he said to Vera softly and gently. "We've become unaccustomed to a lady's sweet touch." And then, to the men, "Mind your language, fellows, go easy on the cursing will you. . . ."

The pretty, blond nurse, at whom Babichuk had already set his cap and who seemed quite bewitched by him, brought the best lamp with a frosted-glass shade into the commander's room, and later came in again with her beau, freshly shaved and wearing well-pressed clothes. She brought Volodya's supper tray, and he followed with bottles of kagor, liqueur, and port.

Volodya looked him up and down calmly, and half-raising his thick eyelashes, asked softly: "Where from?"

Babichuk mumbled incoherently in reply.

"Where are those bottles from?" Volodya repeated.

Vera Nikolayevna then explained to him in a matter-of-fact voice that her uncle had forced open the state-owned wine kiosk they had on the premises and hidden the stores in the basement. And, naturally, on a day like this. . . .

"Bring all the bottles here, into this room," ordered Volodya in the tone of voice he had used in Khara when things were toughest. "Do you understand me, Babichuk?"

"I sure do," he replied, all gladness gone.

"I'm in charge here and I'll shoot anyone who gets drunk," Volodya warned him in the same quiet voice.

Babichuk and Ivan Telegin, funereal expressions on their faces, carried the cases in and stacked them in the built-in closet. Volodya locked it, and on second thought pushed his bed up to the door.

"Well, well! Would you really shoot them?" Vera asked incredulously.

"This is war, and we are in the rear."

"Yes, but you're among your own people. . . ."

Volodya made no reply to this.

All night long he and Vera Nikolayevna stayed with Tsvetkov. At times he raved, but then, peering at Volodya with eyes that were transparent and uncannily lucid, he would ask: "Not back yet?"

Volodya knew he meant Terentiev, and replied contritely: "No, not yet."

The house was strangely quiet and wonderfully warm. Each time he struggled free of his heavy, oppressive drowsiness Volodya thought how marvellous it was to be in this dry, pleasant place, with no trees groaning in the wet, windy night, no cramp in his legs, and to be able to feel so comfortable and relaxed.

"He's not back?" Tsvetkov asked again and again. "You're quite sure?"

"Whom does he mean?" Vera asked softly.

"Just one of our comrades ... he fell behind..."

"I wish you'd lie down and have some real sleep," Vera said. "I can do without, I haven't come out of the forest, you know."

Her eyes were tender, the shaded lamp cast a soft light on her bare arms and the glittering ampoules as she filled a syringe to give Tsvetkov an injection of camphor or caffeine. Volodya, drifting into sleep, thought of Varya's hands, her broad palms and her listening eyes, Varya as he remembered and saw her all those years.

"What a powerful motor!" Vera said when it was nearly morning. "What a constitution!"

Leaning back in her armchair, she continued to study Tsvetkov's face intently, and gradually her eyes lost their look of tenderness and became harder and harder.

When it was quite light, she said with unexpected severity: "He must be a wonderful person. Is he?"

"He is wonderful! One of the best!" Volodya replied.

And without knowing why he did it, he told this doctor woman whom he hardly knew the whole story of their march and all their experiences. He told her about Tsvetkov's magnificent will power, and how they had operated on the children in the station waiting room long ago, in another world; about the German transport plane, and all the miracles big and small which had happened to them under Tsvetkov's command.

"What's his rank, a colonel or thereabouts?" she asked pensively.

"I don't know. He's a surgeon, you know, haven't I made that clear? It was he who operated on the children. I only assisted him...."

After a breakfast of dry millet porridge, Volodya found the housekeeper and asked on whose orders the men were being fed such muck.

Volodya's clean-shaven face, when he confronted her, held not a trace of that refreshing boyishness which used to virtually emanate from him in the old days. He wore his shabby but clean black sweater, the riding breeches they had taken off the dead German lieutenant, German top boots polished to a sheen, and he had a gun in his belt holster.

She got up, sat down again, and opened her thin lips to speak, revealing small, pointed shark's teeth.

"It's got nothing to do with me!" she cried. "I'm not responsible. I take orders from Anatoly Anatolyevich...."

"And who is this Anatoly Anatolyevich?" Volodya demanded.

"They've hoarded tons of everything, the crooks," Babichuk spoke from behind Volodya's back. "Kopytov and I had a look last night. There's butter and ham and tinned stuff and everything. You should see their store of condensed milk! Damn their kulak souls, just give us the order and we'll take it all off them."

Without replying to Babichuk, Volodya went in search of the director. He ran into him at the veranda door.

"I'm Vresov, the director of all this splendour," he introduced himself to Volodya, making way for him to pass. "The ex-director, of course, I just live here now."

Volodya surveyed him in silence. Vresov was a stocky man with pendulous raspberry-red little jowls. He wore a neat, short jacket, and there was something about him that made one think of a yellowed photograph of a schoolboy of another day, a boy with an unnaturally elderly look.

"Taking a walk?"

"Yes."

They went into the drawing room and sat at a round inlaid table. The director rubbed at a spot on the polished table top with his handkerchief, breathed on it and rubbed some more. His jowly face expressed chagrin.

"It's most unfortunate," he said plaintively. "Our cabinet-maker is in the army, and we have no one to look after the furniture...."

"Well, that's war for you," Volodya said vaguely.

The director flashed a quick look at him.

"The food we're given here is very poor," Volodya said stiffly. "My men are famished, the march was exhausting, and you've got plenty of supplies. Orders must be given to let the cooks have all they need. You're the director..."

"It's no use asking me," the director hurried to say. "I'm frightened. It's all very well for you, you're here today and gone tomorrow, but I'll be hanged by the Germans. No, no, don't ask me, someone will tell them, and I'll be done for..."

"But who will tell them?"

"There's always someone," Veresov said with a nervous chuckle. "The homini sapientis are all different, you know! They're very, very different, and you can't know what they're thinking. And I don't feel like being hanged, my dear comrade. If it were for something worthwhile at least, but this is so pointless. No, I'm not going to issue any orders, you may simply seize it all. Take it by force. We'll have nothing to do with it. And that's that. That's settled then. This new ruler of ours, zu Stakkelberg, is not one to trifle with, I've heard enough about him..."

Ustimenko got to his feet.

"Aren't you ashamed of being such a coward?" he asked. "Your niece is not afraid of anything, she's helping us..."

"I haven't her health, my dear friend," Veresov said sincerely and regretfully. "With my monstrous varicose veins I'd never get away. She's got fast young legs, so she doesn't worry. It'll be best really if you take the keys away from me by brute force, I'll go and get them for you..."

He returned with the keys at once and handed them to Volodya.

"I'd advise you not to eat the tinned food now. Take it along with you. You'll be taking my horses too, I expect. Well, it will give you some high-caloried food, more nourishing than bread, cereals or macaroni..."

Dinner that day, and on all the subsequent days which the detachment spent at the Rest Home, was "up to standard", to quote the fast recovering Tsvetkov. He ate enough to fill ten men, steamed himself in the bathhouse every day in company with Babichuk who knew how to get the steam up properly, and did some yogi breathing exercises, never heard of by Volodya before.

"Your beloved science, my good man, is sheer eclecticism, quackery and a swindle," Tsvetkov countered Volodya's sniggers.

"My yogi breathing exercises do as much good as, say, psycho-analysis. But I find them fun, I believe they make me feel better. And what's it to you anyway?"

It was Tsvetkov and not Ustimenko who gave the orders now. All the men, from Kholodilin, the university reader who loved to chew everything over, to Kopytov, the meek and mild quartermaster, looked the happier for it. Their commander's recovery was a good omen. Now they quite sincerely attributed the hardships of those days on the march and the tragedy of their last skirmish to his illness, which, in point of fact, Tsvetkov did not deny.

"Well, my lads, won plenty of battles without me?" He would ask meaningfully. "But I don't suppose you missed me much—I'm an exacting commander, it's more like doing hard labour than fighting a war when I'm there. Right?"

He asked Ustimenko about Terentiev several times a day.

"What happened to him, Ustimenko? What do you think happened? Did the fascists get him?"

At night his high spirits evaporated. Smoking a lot, he talked impatiently and jerkily. "All right, we'll get there . . . no doubt about that . . . I'll answer for it, of course . . . I shan't funk, that's all very well, but. . ."

"What are you talking about?" Volodya asked sleepily.

"The Belopolye affair, damn it. It's all very well for you, you didn't murder anyone, but I murdered a man among men! No, it's not my nerves, it's normal. Let's thrash it out. . ."

And he would go over it again and again, now justifying his actions, now accusing himself, but his accusations were so brutal that it pained Volodya to listen.

"God, how I'd love to get drunk!" Tsvetkov said longingly one day.

"Why don't you? The place is bristling with bottles," Volodya said disgustedly. "Here, behind my bed. Drink the lot, you're the commander."

"You're a worm, and a sly one too!" Tsvetkov said, grinning. "You'd love to see me drunk. But you haven't a hope!"

Vera Veresova usually stayed in their room till late. Tsvetkov said the rudest things to her about women in general and herself in particular and told her smutty and not very funny jokes. Sometimes he chose to be intriguing, maintaining the pose throughout the evening, and then he reminded Volodya of Lermontov's Grushnitsky.

"Alas, dear lady, all is past," Volodya overheard him one evening as he was about to enter the room. "You know the poetry:

*Is this the boy mother loved and raised,
So haggard and sallow, his hair turning grey,
And knowing and wise as a snake. . . ."*

Volodya walked in. Tsvetkov was slightly abashed, and dropping Vera's fingers which he held in his hands, said with a challenge: "I'm no good at reciting pretty verses, I suppose it's more in our dear Volodya's line. . . ."

Kholodilin looked in at the open door, made a sign to Tsvetkov, and quickly disappeared. Vera got up and left, and it saddened Volodya strangely.

"Has the cat got your tongue, or what?" Tsvetkov asked.

And without waiting for an answer he began to expound his views on women. "Eve's daughters" he called them. He spoke at length, with great confidence and extraordinary coarseness. Volodya listened to him in sorrowful silence.

"You know, I'd call this the confessions of a cad. A confirmed, hard-boiled, unexciting cad."

A faint flush appeared on Tsvetkov's still sickly pallid face, and he even seemed a little embarrassed.

"It's nothing but a pose anyway," Volodya went on. "You don't mean it. Living like that must be horrible."

"Ah, but it leaves me a free man!" Tsvetkov said with a smile that was not quite sincere. "And I'll always be free even if I marry, which I'll never do, of course."

"Oh, go to hell! I don't care to talk about such things. . . ."

"I suppose you're in love with some virgin as pure as the driven snow, eh?" Tsvetkov asked, lighting a cigarette and blowing smoke rings. "Who, at this very moment, is. . . ."

"Do you want a punch on the jaw?" Volodya's low voice held a threat. "You're asking for it. And you'll take it not as my commanding officer but as the dissipated, foul-mouthed cad you are. . . ."

Just before suppertime, Kholodilin, "as ordered," brought Tsvetkov several volumes of an old edition of Chekhov, and begged permission to ask him a question. It sometimes pleased this university reader to show off his fine military discipline.

"Yes, what is it?" Tsvetkov asked, assuming the tone of an old general.

"Please don't mind my asking, but why did you suddenly want Chekhov?"

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing, really. But do you read this sort of literature?"

"What sort of literature do you think I read?"

"I couldn't say for certain. But then Chekhov. . . . Or is it for reading aloud? Together?"

"Look, Kholodilin, I wish you'd go away," Tsvetkov told him. "There's something about you today that I don't like."

"Yes sir!" Kholodilin said coolly and left. Tsvetkov's brooding stare remained fixed on the door long after it had closed.

Far into the night, and from early the next morning Tsvetkov pored over Chekhov. And as he read, his lean handsome face reflected a range of emotions: anger, joy, contempt or rapture. Volodya, busy sorting sheets, blankets and medical and food supplies to take with them, was thinking over the complexities of Tsvetkov's nature.

"Listen to this," Tsvetkov cried when Volodya came into the room to get his matches. "Listen to this."

And in a voice literally breaking with emotion, he read:

"I am already beginning to forget the house with the attic, and only sometimes, when I'm writing or reading, I suddenly remember, for no reason at all, the green light in the window, or the sound of my steps in the field at night when I, in love, walked back home and rubbed my frozen hands. And more rarely still, when I have those moments of oppressive loneliness and I feel sad, my memories are blurred, and little by little I begin to imagine, I don't know why, that I, too, am being remembered, that I too am awaited, and that we shall meet. . . . Missyus, where are you?"*

Shutting the book with a bang, he remained silent for a few moments.

"And Chekhov's TB wasn't cured! Oh, you and your precious medicine!" He spoke roughly to hide his feeling.

"Stop clowning," Volodya said gently. "That isn't why you read out that bit about Missyus."

"I read that bit about Missyus, Comrade Ustimenko, because it describes so well how he rubbed his frozen hands," Tsvetkov said stiffly. "I remember it since I was a boy at home, in Kursk. I recall it always when I hear the word Motherland. For me

* From A. P. Chekhov's *The House with the Attic*.—Tr.

that word is not a geographical concept and not even a moral one, it's just this: I'm in love, I hear the song of the famous Kursk nightingale, I'm nineteen, and I've walked her home for the first time in my life."

"Do you love her still?"

"Whom?" Tsvetkov asked, squinting at Volodya in arrogant dismay.

Volodya left the room, thinking: "May you burn in hell!"

"D'you know, he wrote about me too, or rather about my mother," Tsvetkov said when Volodya came back.

"Oh?"

"He did, really. We're village people, we come from Syrna, everyone there is either a Sakharov or a Tsvetkov, there aren't any others. My mother is illiterate, she actually can't read or write. There are Germans in Syrna just now. Well, my mother just couldn't get it that I, her boy, was a doctor, a proper doctor. And when she fell ill and her brothers (I lost my father ages ago) brought her to me in Kursk, where I was doing my training, mother thought that I was one of the male nurses. Can you see it? Now, listen to what he says here."

He read the passage in a harsh voice, biting off the words and making strange pauses:

"And only the old woman, the mother of the deceased, who now made her home with her son-in-law, a deacon, in a small, remote town, when she came out of an evening to meet her cow and pass the time of day with the other women there, would try to tell them about her children and grandchildren, about her son who was an archbishop, speaking timidly, afraid that they would not believe her. . . .

"And indeed not everyone believed her. . . ."*

And again he slammed the book shut, and threw it across his bed.

"You haven't a hope, Messrs. Germans! You'll never reduce us to that again! That's something none of your great tacticians and strategists have taken into account. . . ." Catching Volodya's intent look, he asked: "Do you agree, my good Doctor Haas? Or is a drop of innocently shed blood capable of frightening you so much that you'll never take up arms again?"

That night Volodya sat close to the lamp and read the German newspaper Simakov had discovered in the office. Volodya

* From A. P. Chekhov's *Archbishop*.—Tr.

had been studying it for several days now to practise what German he knew, and that night he had got as far as Rosenberg's article. "Fear must be inspired in all those remaining alive," he read, whispering the words. "The sound of German hob-nailed boots must rouse mortal fear in the heart of every Russian—from infancy to the age of Methuselah. All should remember the wise saying: every country in the world we have conquered will, with tears of gratitude, take that which is not needed by our great German Reich. . . ."

"Comrades, listen," Ustimenko said to Tsvetkov and Vera, and translated the passage for them.

"What of it?" Tsvetkov asked. "What a thing to amuse us with. The subjects Vera and I are discussing are much more interesting. . . ."

"Are they interesting?" Vera asked.

"Frankly, I can't stand any more conversation," he said, looking at Vera with his aggressive, compelling and frankly lustful eyes. "Vera darling, here am I, a healthy male as you know, and all we do is chat and chat. . . ."

"You're being terribly coarse," Vera replied, smiling at him. "Dreadfully. Surely you don't imagine that this beastliness appeals to women?"

"It's been tried and tested," he said, grinning. "It's a perfectly foolproof method. . . ."

Volodya pushed his German paper into the fire and left. It was quite dark outside. He saw Babichuk with his arm round his blond little nurse slip into the shadows behind the house and there was, the meek and mild quartermaster, sedately strolling down the broad walk with the cook.

"Before the war we were very particular about first simmering the beetroots for our horshch in deep fat", Volodya heard her say. "Without overdrawing our allowances, of course. . . ."

Two of the men were sitting on the dining-hall porch, singing a plaintive song about a sadly drooping ash tree. The Milky Way was faintly luminous in the cold, frosty sky. Volodya made an unhurried round of the posts, lit a cigarette and turned homewards. On the way he met Vera almost running, her high heels tapping on the frozen ground.

"Anything wrong?" Volodya asked, suddenly afraid for Tsvetkov.

She stopped and drew back, but then her painted lips parted in a smile. Her perfume was cloyingly sweet, heady and strong.

Letting her shawl slip down to her shoulders, she stood looking at Volodya with her dark, lustreless and probably mocking eyes.

"What can happen to him?" she asked. "He's well, to all intents and purposes. But his mood was spoiled for some reason, and he told me rather rudely that it was time to go to bed. . . ."

"Let's walk for a while, doctor," she said, looking close into Volodya's eyes, and he felt her warm breath against his face. "I must talk to you. I really must."

"All right then," he agreed, none too gallantly.

She took his arm, and quickly pressed her shivering body to his.

"It's a crazy sort of life," she said. "And your commander too . . . he's queer. . . ."

"In what way?"

"Please ask him to take me along," she begged urgently and hurriedly. "I'll be lost here, you know. It's that and everything else! I don't want to be branded as someone who had lived and managed to survive under the occupation. Do you see what I mean?"

"Has fighting and wandering made you such a boor? Or do you think I'm a spy?" she said plaintively. He was conscious again of her warm breath and heady perfume, and her loosened strands of hair that almost touched his face. "I have all my papers here, I'm an honest Soviet specialist, it's your duty to take me with you. I'm strong, I can stand a lot. . . ." Her voice rang with tears. "Oh, why don't you say something?"

"I'm afraid it'll be too hard on you," Volodya muttered in confusion. "It's no picnic, you know. . . ."

Vera's nearness frightened him, her lips were much too close to his. "That's not the way to talk seriously," he thought with sudden anger, but moving away from her seemed stupid, and besides he did not feel like shamming sternness.

"Sure you won't be a crybaby on the march?" he asked with a vulgar familiarity completely foreign to him. "You won't cry for Mummy? Ask to be picked up and carried?"

"No. I won't ask you in any case," she said dryly.

"I still fail to understand one thing," he said after a silence. "What I don't understand is why do you want me of all people to speak to our commander of your wish to go with us? Can't you talk about it to him yourself?"

"It's difficult for me at the moment," she said nervously. "Very difficult, you see? The silliest thing happened just now, and your Tsvetkov simply hates me, I suppose. . . ."

Volodya shrugged: what silly thing? But he left it at that. Neither did he ask Tsvetkov about it, he wasn't the sort to encourage prying. . . .

"How are the wounded getting on?" Tsvetkov asked when Volodya had taken off his boots and stretched out on the spring mattress which still seemed a miracle of comfort. "Can they be moved?"

"We'll be taking them on carts, won't we. . . ."

"That's no answer. I'm asking you: are they in a condition to continue with the march?"

"Yes, quite." Volodya answered resentfully. "However, being a doctor yourself you can. . . ."

"You're the doctor here," Tsvetkov interrupted him frigidly. "And I, as commander, order you, as doctor, to prepare them for moving tomorrow. Is that clear?"

"Yes, it's clear," Volodya replied, and then, suddenly infuriated, swung his legs over the side of the bed, sat up, and demanded in a hurt croak: "Why are you talking to me in that tone of voice? What do you think I am? A looter, a coward or a traitor perhaps? Why the sudden whims? Why the changes of mood? Why do you have to be so bloody rude?"

Amazed, Tsvetkov first raised his head, and then sat up among his pillows. The stunned expression on his face gave way to a smile.

"Please forgive me," he said. "I promise you it'll never happen again. I'll take myself in hand, please believe me. . . ."

And then he told Volodya about the "silliest thing" Vera had mentioned. About an hour ago, when Vera was there with him, Kholodilin had suddenly barged in and told them he wanted to have a man-to-man talk with Tsvetkov. Kholodilin was tipsy, not really drunk. The moment he had shut the door tight, he became frightened of his own temerity, but when Tsvetkov gave him a nod of encouragement he blurted out that there were "unhealthy feelings" brewing among the men caused by their too-long stop at the Rest Home.

"What unhealthy feelings?" Tsvetkov had asked.

"Should I tell you?" Kholodilin was in doubt.

"Since you've started you may as well finish."

"Sure you won't mind? My motives are most honourable, you must believe me." And then he had recited the verse from the poem about Stepan Razin:

*"From the men behind a murmur:
He's betrayed us for a whore,
Just one night he spent in cuddling,
And the man in him's no more..."*

Vera had burst out laughing.

"I'm a man of honour and so I shan't name those of my comrades-in-arms who are affected by these unhealthy feelings," Kholodilin had declared with a drunk's haughtiness.

"And I'm not asking you to!" Tsvetkov had replied. "I understand everything. You may go."

Volodya heard the story to the end, lit a cigarette, and said: "Pay no attention. There's just one complication that I can see—Vera Veresova insists that we take her along. And actually we have no right to refuse her..."

Tsvetkov thought it over for a minute, lit a cigarette too, and looking hard at Volodya pronounced his decision.

"This is how it is to be: Veresova will come with us as your ... as your girl friend, or fiancée or something ... or ... or ... well anyway, you and she are old friends. From now on I'll have nothing to do with her, and there'll be no camouflage about it, I really mean it. Do you get me? I'm no good at pretending. Being all by herself will be rather hard on her. She's not like those ward nurses—Dashas or Mashas or whatever they are called—anyone's girls. She is Dr. Veresova. Vera Nikolayevna Veresova. Well, that's that. Is everything clear to you?"

"Yes, it's clear," Volodya replied, hardly understanding how it would all work out.

"Good. Now that everything's clear I can read a bit—who knows when I'll get another chance!" Tsvetkov said it with relish, and moved the lamp up closer.

"What are you going to read now?"

"Try and guess from the first line..." Enjoying himself immensely Tsvetkov read out:

"It was eight o'clock in the morning, the hour when the officers, officials and visitors usually went for a swim in the sea after a

hot, stuffy night, and then on to the pavilion to have coffee or tea....”*

“I don’t know it,” Volodya said, shrugging.

“Ivan Andreich Layevsky...” Tsvetkov gave him another cue.

Volodya made a regretful grimace.

“And you’re supposed to be an intellectual,” Tsvetkov said, studying Volodya calmly. “A thinking doctor, to whom ‘the large intestine is an open book’ as a friend of mine once said. How come you don’t know your Chekhov?” And then he exclaimed with despair: “But it is not you I’m abusing. No, Ustimenko, it’s myself. I have lived foolishly, not well. Never seemed to have the time.”

He stroked the binding of the book with his large hand and said gruffly: “All right, go to sleep. We’ll get more brainy after Victory!”

Tell Me to Come

Dear Vladimir Afanasyevich,

It’s an old acquaintance of yours who is writing this—Varvara Rodionovna Stepanova is my name. We went round together once upon a time, and even kissed, that is if I’m not mixing you up with someone else, and what is more it was I myself who asked you, you dumb cluck, to kiss me “passionately”. Does it strike a chord? A ship’s foghorn was wailing, you were leaving for Chorny Yar to practise, and it all happened when we were young.

And then motivated by your lofty principles you dropped me. Your sort, you know, do everything in a principled way, you even break people’s backs because you’re so damnably principled.

Why didn’t you turn round that time, idiot?

How dare you not turn round?

And how am I to go on living with a broken back?

Do you know what I often brood on? On the harm pride does to love, provided the latter is there, of course. We owe all our troubles to pride, to an over-deferential regard for our own ego. But if it is love, then it’s not *I* any more, it’s *we*, and it’s *our* vanity that ought not to be hurt and no longer *mine*. For instance, if someone’s mean to you at work, in the “cause you are serving” as you like to call it, I’ll feel that *we* have been injured.

* *The Duel* by A. P. Chekhov.—Tr.

Or if someone's mean to me, you'll mind for *our* sakes. But I can't mind *you* because you are *me*, as my left hand can't mind my right one, see?

I can just see you squirming and saying: "That's all metaphysics and rot."

Remember how mad you got at me that day on the wharf when I said that kisses could be pungent? You don't, my darling idiot? I do. Women remember everything if they want to remember, but if they don't there's nothing anyone can do to make them.

But I haven't finished with what I began to say: those awful misunderstandings in love usually happen because of that same stupid false pride. A person must have his sense of dignity and his pride, of course, but in that vastness of trust which real love presupposes, it's all mere trifles and the vanity of vanities. Since you have trusted your love to me, you have no right to doubt my coming with you to the back of beyond. If I refuse to come it means that there has been nothing, there is nothing and never can be, and not because coming with you means "throwing myself away" as my darling brother puts it. Love, you see, if it is love, unfailingly and gladly does everything that will help it burst into flower and resolutely rejects anything that hinders its normal development. And since separation, however short, does arrest love's natural development, it follows that love itself would object to our separation, and by now I might have already presented you with a baby girl in pigtails, or a baby boy, or both—a boy and a girl, whatever you say!

You must learn to turn round, that's what!

And anyway you'll never find a better girl than me!

A beautiful girl with long legs you may find. You may find one with a slender waist (a waspish waist, as they say in books, but what's so wonderful about them?), with a Grecian or a Roman profile, but one like me—never!

You haven't married your Red Indian girl Tush, have you?

Please don't be mad at me, Volodya my sweet, but when I think that you may have gone and married someone else, I wish you were dead. It was all very well for Pushkin to write: "Be happy, Mary!" But I'm not Pushkin, I'm Varya Stepanova with all the ensuing consequences, as one might say. But then Pushkin, too, was probably lying, sugaring his own pill. I've heard and read enough about his family troubles.

So you'd better die.

You'd be lying so nicely, so comfortably in your fancy coffin, my own dear deceased. But if you marry, they'll push me aside, they won't let me come anywhere near you, not that I'll come, let your mother-in-law and all those people you go to the musical comedy or the football games with do the weeping.

Heavens, what am I saying!

But I do mean it, you know. I can't think differently. I could dash vitriol in your face, I could cut your head off with a razor, I could do anything, you see what a dangerous character I am, Volodya darling?

It must be old Adam raging inside me, or atavism or something that I ought to make an effort to overcome.

It's easier said than done, overcoming it, I mean. It gets beyond my control when I picture you kissing other women pungently.

You're a hateful, disgusting person.

I refuse to think about you any more.

Treating patients, are you? Poulticing people in comfort and security? Taking temperatures? I suppose you've started on your candidate's thesis too—scribbling away in thoughtful absorption?

And we've got a war on here. You do listen to the radio, I suppose?

It's not quite like you imagine it is.

But strange as it may seem I'm putting on weight. Me and Nastya, our "sentimental tank". You know how well I digest any food. Everything is good for me. And for Nastya too. Sometimes we had to give ten or twelve shows a day. And we were treated to dinner every time. But, of course, the hospitality of the Navy is something you don't know, you never had a chance of tasting it, poor soul. It's supposed to be pot luck always, and it's the ship's cook himself who serves it, so not eating means hurting and disgracing a jolly fine person. Refusing is definitely out. You mustn't dawdle with your food either, because he'll think you don't like his cooking.

However, I'm not fat now. I was one time. Don't be surprised that I'm writing you in bits and pieces, you see I stop the race of time for a moment and say to it: "Stop. Let Volodya Ustimenko take a look at you from his beautiful faraway, it'll do him good."

And I believe you do see, because without you nothing is right.

You know, we had some newspaper people come here once. He was the lankiest and skinniest of chaps, just skin and bone, and

our art manager called him a "disembodied reporter". He came with his wife. They work on the same paper, you see. And she kept saying to him: "Oh, Borya, you don't understand a thing!" And he kept nodding in agreement and smiling at her. They joined up together, see?

Together.

We had a drink afterwards, and the woman, Anyuta her name is, asked me with tears of real emotion in her eyes: "My Borya is a strikingly handsome man, isn't he?"

It quite frightened me, I thought the girl had gone crackers. But she was in perfect earnest. Can you beat it?

"He is the most handsome man in the world," she insisted.

I wonder, are you the handsomest man in the world?

And now, Comrade Ustimenko, here's what happened to me next.

We found ourselves in a town I'll call X, where it was decided to stand firm. To do that, all the foodstuff in town had to be moved to Cape X. I made a lot of trips in a lorry, helping the driver to load and unload the cases of tinned food and bags of sugar. I'm tough, you know that, but the driver could hardly believe it and kept saying: "Mind you don't get ruptured, lifting's bad for girls." Well, we were going at full speed when suddenly an officer, holding a gun, stopped us and said: "Turn into the forest and be snappy about it, German motorcycle squads have straddled the road."

Keeping to the forest we finally contacted our own people. After that the Muses were silenced, as our art manager said. Nastya and I worked as waitresses in the airmen's canteen.

And would you believe it, darling, those were the best days of my life.

I don't know why, but here's another bit. Look.

I was all alone in our underground canteen, half asleep because I was dead tired. It was cold and damp, murky and miserable.

Suddenly in walked one of our pilots, Sergei Sergeyevich Borovikov. He's already middle-aged, rather corpulent, and a bit like my Dad. He's made many operational flights, I couldn't tell you how many exactly, but I know it was very many.

He came across the room slowly, dragging his feet in his fur flying boots. He took off his helmet and smoothed down his hair with his huge hands. He was so busy thinking about something that he didn't notice me right away.

"Will you have something to eat?" I asked him.

"Eat? Yes, sure, daughter."

I brought him a fat, greasy pork chop. He stared at it with aversion for some time. He was done up, understand? He just couldn't eat that horrible thing! And besides being greasy it was cold. I knew it, but I was on terribly bad terms with the cook: an out and out rotter, after one thing only and that was—to be evacuated. He even tried to sham a bit of insanity, but it didn't work. A rotter if there ever was one. That's why I wanted Sergei Sergeyevich to refuse the chop.

"I'd love something sourish, daughter," he said to me gently and diffidently. He felt ashamed of himself for detesting pork. He believed he was being finicky. And in wartime!

I went to the galley and prepared the meal myself, while the cook watched me from the corner of his cats' eyes. I chopped up a pickled cucumber, and sliced an onion and a kidney that I fished out of the soup pot. Before serving him the sour soup, I mixed him a salad of sauerkraut and cranberries. The after-a-flight drink of vodka I give the flyers is always chilled properly, so much so that the glass gets misted. The cranberries, Nastya and I gather on the hummocks near the airfield.

Sergei Sergeyevich ate his dinner and told me about the operation. I couldn't understand his flyers' terminology very well, but I did understand that he needed me then, that he had to have someone there to gasp and say: "Really!" "You don't say!" and so on. He wouldn't hear it from the other flyers. They too had fought that day, they too were dog tired, and his story wouldn't impress them. . . .

And then Nastya was evacuated by plane, and I remained alone, the only woman there. I was nurse now as well, because all the jobs got mixed up. The Germans made parachute landings, they assaulted the airfield, but we fought back. And, my dear Comrade Ustimenko, I'll have you know that I fought back too. I fired an automatic pistol, but I didn't do very well. "Stepanova, don't shut your eyes when you press the trigger!" Moshkovets, our chief, said to me sternly. "It's a shame, Stepanova. This way you're firing at the great wide world and not at the enemy. Go away, Stepanova, run away, don't annoy me. . . ."

But he let me keep the automatic pistol because it was a gift to me from one of our men. It's a trophy pistol, it's called a Schmeisser, you've probably never heard such things exist. I was also given a helmet, two hand grenades, and a cute little gun. . . .

One evening Moshkovets dropped in to see me.

He's a hard man, you can't get a word out of him. He shut the door tight, sat down beside me, and said: "I'm off on a tricky job, Varya, give me something for luck."

I thought for a minute and then gave him your photo, it's the only one I have, and you're rather lop-eared in it. I ripped it out of your old student pass after you left for abroad, your Aunt Aglaya let me.

"Who is he?" Moshkovets asked, looking at the photo.

"The person I love best in the world." I told him. "Be sure to bring it back."

And he did. He came back looking sort of charred, and all his boys came back safe and sound, every one of them, only they were terribly worn out. Moshkovets returned your photo to me and with it four identification tags.

"What's that for?" I asked him.

"A bit of interest on the capital."

And only afterwards it dawned on me that they were from dead fascists.

The following night Moshkovets woke me up and told me our boys wanted to say good-bye to me because they were going to fight their way through the enemy lines.

Moshkovets himself had on his helmet and cape. I had some cigarettes, so I handed them all out, my Schmeisser too I gave away, and also one hand grenade and my helmet. Even the non-smokers wanted me to give them a cigarette. It's rather difficult to explain why, but they had great need of me in those minutes. I remember saying the same thing to each one of them: "Everything will be fine, everything will be O.K. You'll get through."

I ran all the way round the storehouse and hid there to watch them pass. And they did. . . .

In the morning we were ordered to evacuate. By plane and launch only. But there weren't enough planes or launches. A pilot I knew, Petya his name was, I forgot his surname, came running to find me and take me along.

"Come on, girl, let's go," he said. "I've a training plane and there's room for one. Mind, no luggage or anything. . . ."

I grabbed my padded jacket, and on my way ran into Seryozha Kornilov, a very nice sailor boy of ours who had a fractured wrist and a shoulder wound. I pulled him along towards the plane. The airscrew was going round and Petya was yelling: "Room for one! One! Only one!"

Someone behind me was tugging at my jacket—it was one of our launch crew, he'd been sent to collect me. It was already dark when we pushed off and the German motorcycle squad came tearing down to the shore. I'm not clear about what happened afterwards. I'm told that we kept going for twenty-three hours. It was terribly cold—that I remember. I also remember all of us suddenly finding ourselves in the water. I was so fagged that I only wished it would be over quickly, but there was an amazingly tiresome young sailor holding on to the same bit of timber as I, and he was so maddening I remember shouting at him: "Stop telling me what to do! You make me sick. Go to hell!"

It's he who told me all about everything afterwards.

And much later I heard someone say: "It'll kill her."

But it didn't kill me. "It" was an enormous mug of raw spirits. I drank it all and fell asleep, and when I awoke I felt I was being roasted in hell. My dear sailor boys had a roaring fire going in the stove, and had put me on the sleeping ledge above it, to sweat it out of my system. I found I had on a pair of men's long underpants with tapes at the ankles, a sailor's jumper, and I was covered with a sheepskin coat and blankets piled on top of that. The sailors were crowded below, talking something over.

I tried to sit up, and couldn't. I was all sticky and glued down.

"Boys," I called down. "I'm in some sort of glue. What am I to do?"

"It's all right," they told me. "There was a large jar of honey standing there, it burst from the heat, and the honey seeped under you. Don't worry, we'll fetch some water and you'll wash it off. Pity about the honey, though. . . ."

While the water was being fetched and warmed I got stuck more and more securely. By that time, I couldn't even stir. At last they pulled me free, helped me down to the floor, and left me to it.

But after that icy ducking my voice was gone.

You were right, Volodya dear, I didn't make an actress.

And now I'm in Moscow. Father wrote to say he'll try and help me, I mean to make myself useful in the war. I can do anything now, you know. But he's stringing me along, my Dad is, I suppose he doesn't want me to get killed. One of the sailors must have sneaked about my almost getting drowned. I've now written him a threatening letter setting the deadline for his

answer. I wrote that I had Stepanov blood in my veins and that he needn't hope that I'll meekly go to Alnia Ata.

It's cold here, and snowing.

And you are probably drinking whisky-and-sodas and writing letters asking them to let you go to war.

Come.

I can't do without you.

It can't be explained but you've got to understand.

And if you want to know the most awful thing about me, something that no one knows nor will ever know, because it only concerns you, and you, silly fool, don't want me—here it is: I'm a wife by nature, Volodya dear.

Scared you?

Did you squirm and wince from horror, from the backwardness of this concept, and the Philistine in me?

Only I'm not like many other wives I know.

I now have before me that horrible, rude and furious letter of yours about Yevgeny, Svetlana, Nyussia and me. You've fitted us all into the same pattern. But it was just spite, I know you didn't mean it. What you said after that is true, though. You must have read my thoughts. "... You could have come here with me and stood by me to help in my job, not glamorous perhaps but important. You would have been my anaesthetist and assistant, you would have been my wife and companion, but..." The rest is of no interest, the rest of the letter is your usual insulting gibberish....

But, Volodya darling, you did not ask me!

You did not turn round to say those words, the most important words of all to me: "Come, you will be my wife and friend."

I'd be everything to you: a nurse for your patients, a doctor, a self-taught specialist, a drug dispenser, a dishwasher. I'm a wife, Volodya, your wife! And please don't look surprised, don't put on that exasperated expression which says "your silly jokes again!"—all this doesn't sound very modern, I dare say, and many would condemn me for it, but I was never a very modern person, if you remember. And the only work I could do really well is *your* work. I could be an excellent helpmate to you and then your cause, the cause you are serving, would also become my life's cause.

That's the kind of wife I am.

I know, my dearest darling, I know that it is no marriage if people have nothing to keep them together except children, home

and bed—don't be shocked. It's not enough. It's not enough to last a lifetime. They don't talk. They play draughts in the evenings and actually boast of this pastime. When he comes home from work she gives him a dutiful peck on the cheek and asks: "What's new?" in observance of the rules of the game, to show concern, understanding and whatever else a marriage is supposed to have.

And he, obviously, replies: "We'll have to ask Mikhail Petrovich to resign. He's impossible!" And she: "Really! I didn't know."

That's what Yevgeny and Iraida call conversation. She even frowns in concentration to show that her mind is working.

There is another variant, of course, when the husband and wife each have their own absorbing work. He has his interests and she has hers. God bless them and keep them well. But I'm not talking about them. It's about myself. My own nothingness, as you once said of me. Well then: I am a wife absolute. I can't stand your doing anything apart from me. I simply can't. I'd go crazy if in that future which we shall never share but just supposing we were to, you were doing one thing and I another. I've got to be with you always. In bad and good, in fortune and misfortune, in fair weather and foul, in war and in peacetime, in the operation theatre and in the first-aid room, in friends' houses and at home.

No, you go out alone and I'll be waiting for you at home.

And you'll come back to me, you must. You'll go to see your old army friend and get terribly drunk with him. And you'll stagger in on all fours. And I'll say to you: "Volodya, do I see what I see?" And you'll say: "I'm sorry, but you do." And I'll say: "Never let it happen again!" And you'll shout—mad, roaring drunk: "Get out! Who's boss in this house? Out of my way! You thing! I'm the boss...." And I'll say: "Yes, darling, yes, you are the boss...."

And in the morning you'll ask me to forgive you. But do you know how you'll do it?

"What was the matter with me last night, Varya?"

I'll remain silent. I'll be stubbornly silent. And I'll sob in silence. And you'll be grovelling at my feet—you'll already be elderly and short-winded, with a bald patch on your darling head. Of course, I'll forgive you, and everything will be all right.

Heavens, how I do get carried away when I talk with you. Forgive me this digression, Comrade Ustimenko.

Volodya dear, do you imagine that in our young days I listened to your medical sermons and your assorted biological ravings because they interested me?

Not a bit.

All that interested me was your attitude to those things, and as your helpmate I'd try to be first-rate, of course. Is it bad of me? Is it violating women's equal rights with you men? But this is not a prescription, it's something that suits me personally. And there's nothing I can do about it, and nothing you can do about it either since I was born that way for *you*.

Well, be good!

Why don't you come and take me to the war with you?

Take me to be with you, Volodya.

Moscow, November 8, 1941
Northern R. Station.

I'm going somewhere, but it's none of your business where!



Chapter 3

About Langevin, French Physicist, and Galen, Roman Physician

Early in December, Tsvetkov's detachment nearly met with disaster. Lacking as they did experience in combat and more especially in partisan warfare with its hardships and complexities, exhausted by the continual need to outwit the pursuing enemy, tormented by rain, damp, and the frost that then gripped the Uncha forests, freezing in summer clothes, the men had become devitalised. When they had fallen into an exhausted sleep near the Veteran Bolshevik state farm, they had almost, quite literally, been caught napping by a

punitive group which would have easily wiped out the whole detachment.

Luckily, Tsvetkov, who always slept with one eye open and an ear to the ground, sensed trouble when he was awakened by the husky yelping of German police dogs not far away, and roused the men. They engaged the attackers. The skirmish was long, difficult and muddled. It was also one they could have done very well without since they inflicted hardly any losses on the enemy.

Ustimenko delegated his surgeon's duties to Vera Veresova, told her where to stay and gave her the necessary first-aid material. He then took part in the fighting.

When it was all over, Tsvetkov called him.

"Who appointed you a machine-gunner?" he demanded in a voice grown hoarse in battle. "Why did you and Tsedunko attempt to flank the Germans when your job is to take care of the wounded? Why did you leave your post?"

"Why, with Dr. Veresova there," Volodya began. "Dr. Veresova. . . ."

"Silence!" Tsvetkov shouted, entirely losing control. "Dr. Veresova had never heard a shot fired until today. Dr. Veresova, indeed!" He imitated Ustimenko. "Where is this Dr. Veresova? She looks like a ghost still, and the wounded are calling for a doctor. Is it my job to put men's legs in splints when a battle is on? Is it? I'm asking you?"

There is no telling how it would have ended had not Kolya Pinchuk, still panting from the exertion and the excitement of the skirmish, come to report that an identification prisoner had "got himself captured".

"Talk properly!" Tsvetkov flared up.

"But he did get himself captured," Pinchuk explained, not a whit put out by Tsvetkov's glare. "He fell into our hands himself. He's got a slight wound, but plenty of gall. . . ."

Ustimenko bandaged the prisoner's wound and poured him out a medicine measure of raw spirits. The German was a tall athletic-looking man, a perfect specimen of the "blond beasts". They had discovered him in a pitfall dug by hunters some time ago. He had fallen into the trap, and had been left lying there, unnoticed by his unit when it withdrew.

At first, the prisoner, staring boldly and unwaveringly with his blue eyes, was as firm as he had been taught to be, refusing to name his unit or answer any other formal questions.

"Why did you start this? What do you want in our Russia?" Tsvetkov asked, unable to resist a psychological investigation.

"There will never be a Russia again," the German said shrugging. "There will be a protectorate with an eternal and wise order. The whole planet will eventually become subjugated to great Germany. We want no *untermenschen* states. Nature herself has intended the *untermenschen* to be slaves, and the Third Reich will carry this intention into effect."

Volodya did not get everything the German said, but Tsvetkov's facial expression, his flaring nostrils and crooked smile, filled in the gaps.

"How did you get on to our tracks?" Tsvetkov asked after a pause.

"I'll only tell your commander that."

"I am the commander."

"Oh no, you're not," the prisoner said with a coolly polite smile. "The Red partisan commander we are after has a beard. Not a very long one. A small beard."

This gave Tsvetkov a jolt. So there must be a proper partisan unit operating somewhere very near, quite close to them, and most probably they had a radio and kept in constant touch with headquarters. They would have an experienced commander and a real commissar.

The German stalled a little longer, but then, deciding that if he told what he knew of the partisans he would not be disclosing any of his own fascist military secrets, gave Tsvetkov all the information he had, frankly and in great detail, about the large and very strong partisan unit that was operating in these parts, blasting bridges and derailing trains, a unit commanded by a famous Red colonel known as Ibov to the Germans.

With a pencil the prisoner traced on the map exactly where the trains had been derailed.

"All right. Take him away," Tsvetkov said, getting up from the tree stump on which he had been sitting. "Only search him thoroughly first."

Kolya Pinchuk, to whom the order was given, turned slightly green, and jabbed the prisoner in the ribs with the barrel of his Schmeisser. The German understood, his face began to tremble, and Volodya turned away. A few minutes later from beyond the pines came a burst of gun fire.

"If you desert your post during battle again, I'll have you

shot," Tsvetkov said to Vera. "We want no passengers in this boat, and cowards even less so. . . ."

"But, Konstantin Georgiyevich," she began to say.

"I'm no Konstantin Georgiyevich to you!" He broke in, speaking through clenched teeth. "I'm your commander. Is that clear? Get back to your duties and don't address me again. Your immediate superior is Dr. Ustimenko. You may go."

Kholodilin who happened to hear him, merely shook his head.

"That is really something. That is straight from the Stepan Razin song:

*Picking up the lovely princess
In his loving, cruel arms,
Overboard he threw her boldly
In the swelling waves to drown.*

"There's a steel temperament for you!"

"Please don't talk rot," Volodya begged him.

When they started on the march again, Vera kept close beside him. A shudder still shook her, her eyes were dilated with horror, and red spots came and went on her cheeks.

"And I thought, what a nice beginning for a military career, surgeon to a partisan detachment," she said in a low voice, and Volodya detected tears. "He'll have me shot, he said. How horrible!"

"It's war!" Volodya said in the tone of an old, old battle-scarred soldier. "Don't take it to heart, Vera Nikolayevna, you'll get used to it by and by. Everyone's frightened at first. Look at our Kholodilin, he was a typical thin-skinned intellectual, and now he's as brave as the bravest. And others too. . . . You've got to keep yourself in hand, that's all."

"Please help me if I lose my nerve," she begged, putting her face close to Volodya's and looking earnestly into his eyes. "Shout at me or something. I don't want that monster to shoot me."

"I should think not!" he said, and smiled.

"Does it seem funny to you?" she asked.

"No. Not at all."

He meant it. He did not think her funny at all. He had smiled because the situation he himself had landed in was too ridiculous: for some unknown reason he was obliged to pretend in front of all the men that he had some sort of connection with

this utterly strange, beautiful woman whom he rather disliked. What connection? What did he care about her? Losing her nerve and hiding from the wounded! He'd joined in the fighting because he thought he could rely on her, he had told her exactly what to do and when, but now he could see blame in Trubitsin's eyes. The soldier's look plainly said: "What sort of person did you trust us to, doctor? Is it right that I should go through all this pain because of her?"

At the halt, both the wounded—Azbelev and Trubitsin—asked for Ustimenko. They said they would rather have him because they were used to him. Vera flushed, and Volodya, who was dressing Kislitsin's old wound, got angry.

"It's not fair," he said, coming to the cart on which the two men lay. "Great pair of heroes, you are! I remember you grumbling, comrade Azbelev, when we first started on the march that it was a hopeless venture and we'd never get through. And she's a woman, she'd never seen fighting before, it was all strange to her."

Azbelev remained morosely silent, while Trubitsin said between exaggerated groans that he was no laboratory monkey and would let no girl students practise on him.

That night they moved the five wounded men and what remained of their provisions on to one cart, and then Babichuk led away the slow-moving skewbald horse and shot it for food. Vera, having refused to eat horseflesh, munched a piece of frozen bread and wept quietly. Volodya, chained to her by Tsvetkov's orders, sat beside her spooning up the horseflesh broth, sweating from the hot food, and thinking how free from strain he would have felt had this been Varya there with him.

"Let me try some," Vera suddenly asked. "It sounds good from the noises you are making."

She tasted it, and made a little grimace that seemed ludicrously out of place in this still, snow-clad forest, with the blazing fire, and the pot of horseflesh broth cooking over it.

"I can't. Even if you shoot me for it!" she said coquettishly.

Volodya made no comment. Actually, he felt sorry for her. That evening, as he examined the men's feet and scolded those who had not wrapped the footcloths properly again, he suddenly felt that he had not the strength to crack the old jokes any more. Apparently, the march had worn him out completely too.

"Feeling the strain, doctor?" Tsvetkov called out to him when he was coming back to the fire. "Come and sit down," he sounded

as if he were asking a favour of Volodya. "Sit down!" he told him peremptorily, noticing his reluctance.

The commander—neatly shaved, as always, and smelling of a queer mixture of face lotion and the smoke of woodfires—was sitting straight-backed beside an old pine, kneading a cigarette with his fingers and glancing through the German newspaper taken off the fascist shot earlier that day.

"It's a curious thing, the daily round of science," he said with a cool smile. "Here's what the Germans themselves write about our famous contemporary, the French physicist Langevin. They imprisoned him in Santé in Paris, and the French Academy of Sciences did not intervene in his behalf. Can you imagine it? And what is more, it's very broadly hinted here that Langevin was arrested on orders of the Vichy scholars, Vichy fascists they mean. In this article the Germans praise the Academy to the skies, of course, for its 'loyalty'..."

"But why do you call it the daily round of science?" Volodya asked.

"Because to these worthless swine the greatest problems of science are, figuratively speaking, no more than problems of 'menu', of stuffing their bellies, or perhaps of private villas for those that get a bit higher, and for the real higher-ups—of millions, private yachts, private islands, diamonds, and I don't know what else, I wasn't taught those things, you know. And historical scraps, such as the present, give plenty of scope for this sort of thing, and show up those scholarly animals for what they are—just animals. There's a lot to reflect on here, both as regards the present and the past..."

He glanced at Volodya coldly, with a little smile.

"Hasn't it ever worried you that the old, worthy, and even famous does not, as a rule, help the new, and on the contrary stifles it, mustering all its decrepit but powerfully diplomaed and officially endorsed degrees and senile strength to hold and drag back the truly new and progressive, but never to help it, no."

"Such as? Can you give me an instance of this?" Volodya asked, suddenly and gladly recalling his conversations with Polunin.

"An instance? I'll find some if you like. Oh yes, why don't you invite your lady friend to join us, after all, she claims to be a doctor, I believe..."

Volodya hid a smile. Though Tsvetkov, more often than not, spoke of women with contempt, he was one of those men who

felt much less happy in their absence than in their presence, especially if they were beautiful and made good listeners—a great art, indeed.

"What does he want me for?" Vera asked, alarmed. "He'll start shouting at me again. . . ."

"No, he won't, he's in a benevolent mood," Volodya told her. "He wants to talk."

Vera, wearing a sheepskin coat and a pair of soft felt boots, approached Tsvetkov warily, a humble look in her dark eyes.

"You ordered me to come," she said meekly.

"Are you afraid of me?" Tsvetkov asked.

"Of course I am. No one ever threatened to shoot me before. Or shouted at me the way you did. . . ."

"As a matter of fact, it was *not* meant in fun," Tsvetkov replied unsmilingly. "Take a seat. Our Ustimenko here wanted you to join us in our conversation. . . ."

This came as such a surprise that Volodya's mouth fell open and his eyebrows strained towards the hairline, but Tsvetkov took no notice whatever and behaved as if it had really been Volodya's idea to fetch Vera.

"I've just made some tea," he said like a good host. "It's good and strong. Pity there's no sugar left. . . ."

Having poured out a cup for Vera, he told her what they'd been talking about and proceeded to cite instances from memory.

"We'll start with Galen if you like. Everyone knows him, every medical student has heard of him at any rate. He's the founder, the dean, and so forth. It's obvious that if he had been less gifted by, say, two-thirds, his life would have run a much safer course. But it was precisely his genius that united against him all the ungifted scoundrels of that epoch. Nothing unites the giftless so strongly as the appearance of a real talent which, by its very existence, threatens their well-being. No one who makes an honest study of the history of science could fail to see that. In this connection, it's appropriate to mention the case of our contemporary Langevin once again. It was only because his services to science were recognised throughout the world, that those would-be scholars had no choice but to admit Langevin to their establishment which, according to their everlasting declarations, is outside politics. But political machinations relieved this crew of their moral obligation to protect their own academician from the brown plague, and so they gladly renounced him be-

cause he is a man of talent and therefore a dangerous rival for all of them put together. . . . By the way, Vera Nikolayevna, did you ever study the history of medicine?"

His manner was blandly courteous, but she started nervously and mumbled something vague and inconclusive.

"In other words, yes and no," Tsvetkov said, smiling. "It was just something you *took* at the institute. God, what a term! You take a subject at school! However, it's a good thing perhaps that you only *took* it, because if you don't use your own brains you can believe that there has always been peace and quiet in our science, as sweet as that touching moment in the life of the young Pushkin when the senile Derzhavin gave him his blessings to embark on a poetic career. The historians of medicine, which to my mind plays a bigger and certainly not a smaller part in the life of people than art, those goody-goodies are terribly anxious to represent it all as a charming, festive affair, in colours predominantly baby-pink or perhaps baby-blue. Don't you agree, Ustimenko?"

Being a true pupil and admirer of Polunin, Volodya naturally agreed with this and was about to make what he fancied was an apt reply, but Tsvetkov, who could not care less for Volodya's opinion, never gave him a chance to put a word in, and went on talking with now an eye to Kholodilin, who had come up closer to listen. In his funny sort of jerkin, from which the eider-down stuffing oozed here and there, and in his floppy eared cap, he looked like one of Napoleon's soldiers after the battle on the Berezina.

"And not in medicine alone, in the history of any science we see the same picture," Tsvetkov continued. Unexpectedly, his hard, weather-beaten face was twisted with rage. "The same!" He almost shouted. "It's exactly the same, and yet no one will take the trouble to stop and think about it, if only to safeguard our future from a recurrence of these monstrous precedents. Monstrous! Take Galen, with whom we began this. The green-eyed, the slanderers, the lickspittles, and the mediocrities did get him banished from Rome, you know. And yet our modern historians of medicine, parroting his jealous detractors, say that he was a 'difficult and obstinate' man, concluding this from the 'scientific' material bequeathed by poor Galen's contemporaries. I have formed a little idea of my own on this score, based on observation. The envious and the slanderers of our Pirogov also accused him of being a 'difficult' person, cantankerous too, as well as ob-

stinate. And do you know who started it? It was a supplies officer in the Crimean war, one of those thieves whose stealing came to an end under our good Pirogov. . . .”

At the mention of Pirogov his eyes suddenly softened and a glow of tenderness, so strange to him, lighted up his face. As though embarrassed, he turned away from the fire at once and fumbled in his bag for a cigarette. In that moment Volodya intercepted Vera's look: she was gazing at Tsvetkov timidly, without raising her eyes, and even to Volodya who was amazingly unobservant in such matters it was plain that she was in love with him, that she was listening to him with pleasure, no, with adoration, and that she would listen to him as happily if he expounded a diametrically opposite view.

“They also alleged that Galen turned coward in face of the plague. And Pirogov, too, had his detractors in the Academy of Medical Surgery who started a nasty little rumour that he ran away from the Crimea, from Sevastopol, because he was frightened by the shelling. Oh, why talk about it!” Tsvetkov made a hopeless gesture, selected a smouldering coal, lighted his cigarette from it with picturesque elegance, and smoked in silence for a minute or two. “There are analogies galore! And as for Harvey's treatise on the movement of the blood, in spite of the fact that he lived in the time of Shakespeare and Bacon it was the same kind of united mediocrities who got him pronounced insane. Incidentally, it's an interesting point that it's not only the mediocrities in their legions who prevent science from going forward—that wouldn't be so bad—it's also men of talent, big men. For example, you wanted more instances, Ustimenko, so here you are: James Simpson who discovered the beneficial properties of chloroform at the same time as Pirogov and who met with all kinds of adversity while fighting for his discovery, blocked Lister's path later on, and nothing would move him. There was an outcry against him in his day, that bringing children forth in suffering was God's will and that attempting to alleviate the pain with chloroform was an infringement upon His divine providence, and later it was Simpson himself who managed it so that Lister's native London was the last place in the world to give up the battle against antiseptics. And this was due to the activity, the energy and the prestige of a man who was celebrated at the time! And what about Pasteur? A gang of caricaturists and journalists made their living for quite a long time by jeering at Pasteur's microbes. And he read those papers every day, you

know. He would have done much better, of course, if he had saved the energy he wasted on fighting the obscurantists of his day, saved it for his work. . . ."

Suddenly, his face growing tense, he turned to Kholodilin: "What makes you smile, Kholodilin?"

"Nothing. Just an idea that came into my head," Kholodilin replied in his thin warble. "But subordination, and all that. . . ."

"Never mind. Shoot."

"I just thought that when this war is over you'll naturally get your professorship or doctorship, or perhaps your luck and your unquestionable talents will carry you even higher up—how will you act then? For instance in matters touched upon in this most pleasant conversation? Please don't mind my asking, but this conversation in the forest doesn't mean a thing and we can be as righteously indignant as we please, but just supposing you were in office? Supposing you were in office, with your private secretary and your reception hours, or perhaps with an aide and again your reception hours, and it all depended on you, how would you act? Would you dispense blessings and offer support, or would you also. . . ."

"What?"

"Oh well, why put it in so many words, comrade commander. . . ."

The crimson glow of the dying fire wavered across Kholodilin's long-unshaved face with its tufty growth of beard; there was a funny tapping sound when he stamped his feet to keep warm, because he wore football boots, acquired at the rest home, with the tops now torn and secured with rope. He made a ridiculous sight, but the look in his eyes was jolly and fearless, and his whole attitude seemed to say: "That's the sort of man I am, you can like it or lump it!"

But Tsvetkov won this challenge, too.

"God alone knows," he said in genuine and angry perplexity. "I don't. Never thought about it that way. I can make no guesses about myself."

"If you can't how can I?" Kholodilin exclaimed. "How could I possibly make guesses about you if you can't make them about yourself? And yet, comrades, I can make guesses about myself, worse luck for me. And not to my credit either, even though I can safely say without boasting that I behave quite well in battle. Lately I've begun to believe that I am actually a good soldier. I

swear I never feel scared. That is, I do inside, but whose business is that? But if they went for me in the so-called field of science. . . ."

"What then?" Volodya asked.

Kholodilin took a look about him and thought his answer over before speaking. There was real humility in his tone.

"If that well-organised force went for me in a body, and I've seen it done, so I know what it's like, I don't know. . . . I really don't know. I'm no Giordano Bruno, I haven't got it in me. I wouldn't be able to get the better of them, no. And supposing I was put on the carpet before a strong-minded professor, a doctor of science, crowned with various laurels, someone with a temper like, say, our commander, Comrade Tsvetkov, and with a slight paunch growing in proportion to his merits? He'd have got his nice little pot-belly through always riding in a car and dining out on caviar, succulent sturgeon and those delicious game juliennes. A well-merited, dignified pot-belly, none will disagree, the result of a chair-warming kind of activity, with never even a game of tennis to break the monotony because it may be bad for his heart."

"He's doing fine, isn't he?" Tsvetkov said to Volodya with a jolly wink.

"Did you say fine?" Kholodilin asked, catching that one word. "No, it isn't fine at all. It's very sad, and it's a warning to all of us. An opponent like the one described, would simply snuff me out like a candle. He would I know, because some members of our esteemed professoriate, especially those that have impressive degrees and more especially if they have had some experience in wielding power, can sound so chillingly authoritative, they are so irritably intolerant, so patently bored from the start and show such insulting condescension, that even in your dreams you'd find it difficult to stand up to all that. And do you know, comrades, even now, here in the forest, after battle and ready for new battles, I cringe from just picturing that scene, the green cloth on the table, the chandeliers, the rostrum, and those scientists coming in with deliberately unhurried steps, all bearded, goateed or moustached, grey-haired and cultured, honoured already and confident of being honoured again and again, convinced that it would be practically indecent not to pile honours on them—men who had mastered all sciences—for their activity. Oh no, I couldn't stand up to them, or rather I wouldn't last long. And you, Ustimenko, would you have the stamina?"

Volodya gave Kholodilin a long look, saw his frightened eyes, and throwing his cigarette into the fire said seriously: "It's a frightening story you've told us."

"Wouldn't you be scared?"

"Not scared enough to give in."

"What courage!" Tsvetkov drawled, chuckling. "Maybe you're too young and innocent to picture certain things?"

"Oh no, I can picture everything," Volodya replied as thoughtfully and seriously as before, rejecting his commander's jocular attitude. "I can picture it perfectly."

At first he wanted to word his speech carefully, but then decided to say exactly what he thought, and as sharply as it came.

"I can picture it perfectly," he repeated. "Only . . . I'll never in my life settle for a compromise of any sort if it concerns my work. You don't believe me, I can understand that, I understand it very well, but I do have complete confidence in myself. And the horrible picture you've painted, Kholodilin, the green cloth and everything, does not frighten me. I suppose one feels as unutterably frightened as all that if one is fighting for one's personal welfare and not for one's cause—we do mix up the two sometimes, don't we? Fighting for one's position, degree, title and so forth has nothing to do with fighting for one's cause. . . ."

"Sounds too clever," Tsvetkov said, yawning. "Can't be digested without a good dinner."

Volodya's eyes smouldered like hot coals, and without another word he got up.

"Are you angry?" Tsvetkov asked him.

"No."

"What's wrong then?"

"I'm simply bored."

Kholodilin left them, and so did Vera. Volodya remained standing near the smoking fire which was flaring up again. Tsvetkov glanced up at him every now and again.

"I wonder what we'll be like ten years or so from now," he said musingly. "You and I. . . ."

And abruptly he changed to the subject of Chekhov again. According to him, in portraying von Koren, the zoologist, Chekhov had described fascism in its embryonic state.

"Oh hardly," Volodya said doubtfully.

"Not hardly but definitely! By and large, Ustimenko, it would be a good thing for politicians to take real literature a bit more seriously. Fascism and all it involves was described years ago.

Take the *Salamander War*—some Czech wrote it, I forgot his name. It's all there, but do the presidents, the prime ministers, field marshals, advisers and people read such books? No. They imagine that their top-secret files contain more useful information than a book of fiction. 'Rubbish,' they say, if they do read a novel in their spare time to amuse themselves. But they miss the warning, they don't hear the alarm. They're above heeding advice because it's they who hold the ranks, degrees and positions, as Kholodilin has just been telling us, and a writer is just a scribbler, a nobody. And just now, of course, a personage like that is hiding in his steam-heated air-raid shelter, digging in his nose to while away the time and doing a bit of desultory reading until the Fritzies stop bombing his country. 'How true! How true!' he says. But the book may have been written ten years ago and banned because it casts aspersions on a 'friendly' nation, that is the fascists."

"Really?" Volodya said, at a loss.

"I'm positive. However, you're not well read, so there's no pleasure in talking with you. Let's turn in. . . ."

"What a giant of a man the commander is!" Vera said, settling down to sleep in a low shelter of fir branches piled high with snow. "He's got a tremendous personality! And he's so truthful!"

"Yes, he is that," Volodya answered dully.

He felt depressed. The sooner he stopped going over that conversation, the better. But now Vera, having tucked herself in snugly in her two blankets on top of her padded jacket (they all had blankets now, requisitioned from the Vysokoye Rest Home), and feeling nice and warm, suddenly became wide awake and started telling Volodya the story of her life as intimately as if he were her best girl friend. Volodya wanted to sleep and Vera's life story did not interest him in the slightest, but she was an insistent narrator and he was a polite person. And so, mumbling "really!" and "imagine!" from time to time, and giving himself a shake like a dog after a swim lest he should fall asleep and snore, he heard it out. She told him all about her childhood and adolescence, her handsome father and her beautiful mother, and their love—a passionate, tormenting love that never happens in real life but is very popular with storytellers; she told him how her father adored and worshipped her, his only daughter, what a gifted specialist he was, and how glad her daddy and mummy would be to welcome Volodya to their Moscow flat. She also told

him all about her first teenage love, and how he, Kiril, had once carried her across a roaring stream (she said exactly that), and how and what he wrote to her from near Vyborg during the Finnish war, between flights.

"He's a wonderful person," said Vera. "I'm sure he has many flyers under his command now. A wonderful person, and so strong-willed! You know he has a virile sort of face, of the Knut Hamsun type."

"He looks like Knut Hamsun? Whiskers and all?" Volodya asked just for something to say.

"Whv whiskers?"

"Knut Hamsun wore whiskers."

"I mean like his heroes. Like Glahn, you know."

"Oh. Of course. . ." Volodya said, dropping off.

"Are you asleep?"

"No, please go on," he mumbled, almost dead with weariness. "Please. . ."

Telegin shook him awake at 2 a.m. to relieve the sentry. Swaying on his feet and shivering in the increasing cold, he checked his Schmeisser, and soon after 6 a.m. the detachment, having breakfasted on horseflesh soup with millet from their rest home supplies, set out single file along the snow-covered forest path, heading for Vspolshchina, where Tsvetkov hoped they would meet someone from Lbov's group.

"Our ammunition is running low," he told Ustimenko in a low, gloomy voice. "Tobacco, too. And we've no more bread. We're in a bloody mess, doctor." Suddenly, he tossed his head, spat on the ground, gave his frozen ears a hard rub, and said cheerfully "We'll fall into their lap today. Want a bet?"

And this was why, perhaps, Volodya was little surprised to hear a sentry's hoarse, imperious shout in the gathering darkness.

"Halt! Who goes there? Don't move. Drop your weapons. The commander to go to the slashing. Quick march!"

"They could not see where the slashing was.

"We are a partisan detachment, commanded by Medical Officer Tsvetkov. We are partisans like you," Tsvetkov called out in a clear, ringing voice. "Send someone out here to talk to us, and you'll see. We don't know our way about in this place. And hurry, comrades, some of our men are wounded, and all of us are near collapse."

A little time passed before a light appeared behind the dark wall of firs.

"I give you warning: There's a machine-gun trained on you. So just be careful if you're a bunch of traitors." The same imperious voice told them.

A smart, middle-aged, thickset man wearing a short army coat and a fur hat with a red ribbon, and holding a hand grenade approached Tsvetkov.

"Drop your weapons here, will you," he said politely. "Right here, where the snow's been stamped down."

He ran his flashlight over the faces of Ustinenko, Kholodilin and Babichuk, took a look at the wounded, sighed, and said, commiseratingly: "You've certainly had it tough, boys. Really tough, I see."

Two young soldiers on skis, in warm padded jackets and caps, carbines slung on their shoulders, emerged from behind the trees bordering the path along which Tsvetkov's detachment had come.

"Is it them?" the middle-aged, thickset man asked.

"It's them all right," a young voice replied. "The very ones. We've been following them all the way from the Shepelevsky farm."

A twinge of annoyance crossed Tsvetkov's face: these skiers must have watched them during the halt last night, too.

"They're our people," the second skier said. "They ran into trouble a little way from the farm. It was pretty bad, couldn't be worse. But they got away all right, didn't do too badly."

"You'll be sorry if you've put them on our trail," the middle-aged soldier grumbled, relieving Tsvetkov of his gun. "Get me?"

About an hour later, Tsvetkov and Volodya were sitting in Lbov's clean, warm dugout, answering the terse, sharp questions put to them by Lbov himself and commissar Lutsenko. The tea in the thick German cups was growing cold, but no one touched it. The potatoes, swimming in yellow fat, had also grown cold long ago. Tsvetkov merely helped himself to the home-grown tobacco he was offered, rolling and smoking one cigarette after another as he went through the interrogation, a necessary check-up without which neither he nor his men could join Lbov's unit.

"Tell me again, what's your name you say?" Lutsenko asked Volodya, squinting his narrow eyes at him coldly.

Volodya repeated his surname, spacing out the syllables.

"Not Aglaya Petrovna's son, by any chance?"

"No. She has no children. I'm her nephew."

"The one who was abroad?"

"Yes. She has no others."

"Have you seen her since you've been back?"

Lbov stopped questioning Tsvetkov and turned round to watch Lutsenko.

"I have," Volodya answered. "Dr. Tsvetkov and I even performed some operations there, at Vasilkovo Junction, where she was in charge of the evacuation. . . ."

"Well, well, well," Lutsenko said happily. "Well, well. You wouldn't know what her plans were, would you?"

"I do know, but my aunt asked me not to tell anyone. . . ."

"Well, well, well," Lutsenko said more happily still. "Did she ask you not to tell us either?"

Volodya made no answer.

"Your dear aunt is safe and sound, at present," the commissar suddenly beamed at Volodya. "I'm glad to be able to tell you this. You can write her. She'll get your letter in due course, or a little later. And now, just one more question, the last: after that ugly business at Belopolye who did you send to contact us? What's his name?"

"Terentiev. Alexander Vasilyevich Terentiev," Tsvetkov replied. "He's a land reclamation engineer."

"Does it tally?" Lbov asked. His large, thin-lipped mouth was clamped shut, and his heavy clefted chin thrust forward as he waited to hear Lutsenko's answer.

"It does," the commissar nodded. "I'm glad to be able to tell you your comrade is alive, but he has been seriously wounded. It's thought that he'll recover. He was unable to carry out his assignment because he happened to come under German fire."

"Well, everything's clear now, I suppose?" Lbov asked.

"I think so, comrade commander."

"Why do you keep staring at me?" Lbov asked Tsvetkov.

"You see, a German prisoner told us that there was supposed to be a beard," Tsvetkov answered somewhat haltingly. "That is why. . . ."

Lbov grinned, and rubbed his chin with the palm of the hand.

"I've shaved it off. It's been and gone! The Germans have posted up my picture and are offering quite a decent reward. It's not a picture of me, of course, the beard is the main thing. We tripped up the Fritzes on that. . . ."

Volodya and Tsvetkov got up to go, thinking the interview over, but Lbov told them to stay. In those few seconds his inscrutable face underwent a transformation—he was no longer the officer in command, but simply an elderly, intelligent, tired and good-

natured man. And the commissar's narrow eyes had a sly, not to say ironical twinkle in them now.

"So that's that," Lutsenko said, putting a bottle of vodka on the table. "The picture is clear. Is it also clear to you, comrades, that the Germans are not grazing too happily on our pastures?"

His face grew serious again.

"It takes some imagining, that!" He cocked his head as if listening. "By appearances they are winning, they are the conquerors but who are the masters? We. The distances! Hundreds of kilometres, but we've got contact. Here's Aglaya Petrovna's nephew come from the forest, and we can give him news of her. They thought they'd lost their reclamation engineer, and he's right here, taking pills and getting all manner of shots. Take this famous and heroic Death to Fascism detachment, directed, shall I say, by Comrade Tsvetkov. It would be interesting to trace its route. How many of our people did it pass? They kept to the forests and marshes, always trying to avoid encounters, and yet there are no few of our people everywhere. Oh well, never mind. We learn from our mistakes."

Lbov poured out the vodka.

"To you, doctor-commanders," he said, smiling. "Here's to our acquaintance! And talking of mistakes, who doesn't make them?"

Tsvetkov's face was red and sulky. He had pictured this meeting quite differently. However, he was quick to admit his faults, and by the time he and Volodya were settling down to sleep after a good wash in the underground bathhouse, commander Tsvetkov, who was again plain Konstantin Georgiyevich, had drawn all the necessary conclusions.

"That stab you made at me once, calling me a small-scale Napoleon, was quite justified," he said resentfully but quite sincerely. "I do have it in me, dammit. It's hard to get rid of. I imagined that our detachment was the only one in the whole of this occupied region. We alone were the daredevils and heroes. And actually..." He sighed, and added: "Still, I did get you out. I did bring you here. It was I who did it!"

"Incidentally, we also tried to get out of there," Volodya needed him.

"Trying and doing are two different things. Don't you agree, my good Doctor Haas?"

Volodya kept his silence. It was pointless arguing with Tsvetkov. But all the same he could not help admiring him, he had

to give him his due for his will power, intelligence and sheer strength.

They were roused in the middle of the night.

Tsvetkov had already got up and dressed while Volodya was still struggling out of his heavy, drugged sleep.

"Get up, damn you!" Tsvetkov said to his still groggy friend. "They've brought in a wounded man, and we're urgently wanted in their hospital. Lbov's orders."

Volodya finally got up, but he felt so dizzy that he had to lie down again for another minute.

"What's the matter with you? Are you off your head?" Tsvetkov shouted at him.

The boy who came to fetch them stood in the doorway, shuffling his feet impatiently. It was not as early as they thought, the fair winter day was well into the morning, they discovered, as they walked quickly to the hospital. Lbov, in his white sheepskin coat, felt boots and fur hat, was pacing to and fro in front of the door. He was obviously upset and worried.

"Hurry!" He told them brusquely. "It's a fine person the Germans have wounded, something's got to be done, quickly...."

"Is he a partisan commander?" Volodya asked.

"No, why a partisan? No, all our men are whole. Not a scratch on anyone. It's a German, our men rescued him. It was his own people, the fascists, who shot him...."

"But look here," Tsvetkov began to say.

Lbov would neither listen nor explain anything, saying all that would keep. He pulled open the door into the dugout—a heavy door made of freshly planed boards—and said: "We'll talk later. After you."

The hospital evidently stretched far and deep below the ground. There were dark, warm, quiet passages, planked with birchwood slabs, running away to the right and left from the large entrance hall, lighted dimly by an oil lamp standing on a shelf. From the operating room where a brighter lamp was burning, came the sounds of groaning, in quick, short gasps; the shape of a large figure in smock and cap was silhouetted on the bedsheet draping the doorway.

"Our doctor is very, very old," Lbov told them, indicating the silhouette. "You won't be too hard on him, will you."

The first thing Volodya saw inside the doorway was a German officer's coat with silver piping on the shoulder pieces, a cap with a tall crown and again silver piping which had rolled across

the floor, and some blood-stained pieces of uniform and underwear that had obviously been cut open and turned inside out.

Lbov remained in the entrance hall, sitting on a birch stump, while Tsvetkov and Volodya got a couple of white crumpled smocks from a packing case, put them on, and began to scrub up, still not looking in the direction of their patient and only listening to the flurry of words addressed to them by the old doctor.

"I'm at my wits' end, I've no idea what to do with him. I can't get him out of shock. I'm beaten. It's a very bad wound, very bad indeed, and I doubt if we can do anything for him here. Besides, he's not young, he's not a young man at all, he's a man of advanced years. Please go into it yourselves, comrades, to tell you the truth I've never dealt with wounds of this kind, I never had to. . . ."

"You've got to get him well!" Lbov rapped out loudly. "Afterwards I'll explain why. . . ."

Tsvetkov went up to the wounded man, and Volodya followed him. The German lay on his side on a bench covered with oil-cloth, his puffy, pug-nosed face with hardly any eyebrows and a tuft of white cropped hair above a rather low forehead, was quite expressionless except for an occasional grimace of pain that contorted it grotesquely.

"Bring the lamp here," Tsvetkov ordered.

The white-smocked nurse in knee-high boots stood beside Tsvetkov holding the paraffin lamp. The old doctor was saying something in a wheezy whisper behind Volodya, but no one paid any attention to him any more.

"How did it happen?" Tsvetkov asked loudly enough for Lbov to hear.

"It was just one of those things," Lbov answered in a steady voice. "He had a rendezvous with my men, I mean he was leaving Hitler and coming over to us. And so one of his own Germans, a bloody fascist, took a shot at him with his rifle which had a telescopic sight. . . ."

"How long ago?"

"Two or maybe three hours. He fell down, they picked him up and brought him here on a sledge at once. I'll get all the details if you want them."

"Hold the lamp higher," Tsvetkov told the nurse. "A bit to the left now. Can't you be quicker on the uptake? Don't you know your left hand from your right?"

"I think it's a bullet wound, a blind wound," Volodya said

irresolutely. "There's injury to the spinal column, but the question is where's the bullet."

Tsvetkov frowned in thought. "Is the spinal cord compressed?" He asked a minute later.

"Of course it is. All the way across."

"A hell of a lot we can do then. We'll be puttering like stone-age surgeons," Tsvetkov said. "All right, prepare him for the operation."

"For a laminectomy?" Volodya asked.

Tsvetkov nodded. Volodya poked his head out of the door and asked for more lamps.

"What are the chances?" Lbov asked.

"Comrade Lbov, I can't talk in phrases like 'the patient will live'. Everyone knows that prognoses in cases of spinal cord injury are always most unfavourable, and especially in conditions such as these. . . ."

Lbov clamped his jaws, his strong, bony chin jutted out, and the muscles rippled under his skin.

"All right. You'll get all the lamps you need."

He left the dugout, carefully closing the door after him.

By seven in the morning they had succeeded in getting their patient out of shock.

"Is it all up with me?" the German asked almost calmly and clearly. "Is it the spinal column?"

"Not quite," Tsvetkov answered him evasively in German. "Near enough, but not the column."

The operating room seemed unbearably hot. The more so, perhaps, because they were unused to warmth. And then the lamps too, gave off scorching heat.

"What are you going to do?" the German asked again.

"We'll clean the wound out a bit," Tsvetkov said. "It's clogged with all sorts of rubbish—shreds of underwear, uniform. . . ."

"Look here, I'm a surgeon, my name is Hummel. You can tell me the truth."

He named his injury in medical terms, not as a question but as a statement of fact. Nor did he qualify the fact at all.

"Well then, shall we begin, with your permission?" Tsvetkov asked.

"Yes, please," Hummel said, and then added hurriedly: "Wait a minute. I've an assortment of drugs in the pockets of my top coat, in the inside pockets, and also in my tunic, I mean everywhere. There's some streptocide among them. I don't suppose

it would help me, but some of the medicines may be needed for others. Directions are given on all the boxes, you understand, Herr Doctor? And now, please begin. How do you say it—good luck, *v dobri chas!*” he said in Russian.

Volodya assisted Tsvetkov who worked smoothly and calmly. The fat old local doctor was assigned the duties of theatre sister. Puffing and blowing, he kept handing Tsvetkov the wrong instruments and sighing like an old woman, “Oh dear me, dear me!” Tsvetkov swore at him twice, but after that he merely glared at the old muddler.

“It’s really funny,” Hummel spoke suddenly. “My feldsher, a German, an Aryan, my assistant, fired at me, and now Russian doctors, Slavs, my enemies, are trying to save my life. It’s really funny,” he repeated. “Very, very funny.”

Volodya felt cold now, he even thought there was a draught coming in from the door. The lamps were scorching him, but his feet were like ice. Suddenly he felt almost too weak to stand up. . . .

The German cried out hoarsely in pain.

They could see the thick lower part of the bullet now. Tsvetkov very dexterously and quickly stopped the bleeding with a tampon.

“Palette knife!”

At last the bullet fell on the floor with a thud.

“All over?” Hummel asked.

“Yes, it’s all over,” Tsvetkov said, straightening up and drawing a deep breath. “You’ll get your bullet in a minute for a keepsake.”

The German thanked the two surgeons in solemn, somewhat grandiloquent terms. There were tears in his little eyes, and his plump face glistened with sweat. His breath came short and fast: he must have been in terrible pain.

“I’ll stay here, and you go and report to the commander,” Tsvetkov told Volodya. “My advice to you is to go and lie down. You look ghastly. And send Veresova here, at least I’ll have a competent nurse.”

Volodya nodded and walked out. It was midday, the sun was high in the cold, frosty sky. Thick, homely smoke poured from the short chimneys of the dugouts and rose straight to the flimsy clouds above; at the tethering post the partisans’ horses were loudly crunching their chopped straw; soldiers came at a run from the kitchen, carrying pailfuls of soup, tea kettles and loaves of bread.

He stayed for a minute out in the cold, trying to collect his thoughts. But it was no use. Forgetting to take off his white coat, cap and mask, he wended his way to the staff dugout, staggered down the steps, and tried to tell them everything about Hummel, but he simply could not make a coherent report. He knew that he was talking rubbish, telling them again and again about catgut, it was some trifling detail that did not matter in the least, but it had got him stuck and he could not get on.

"Good. I see," Lbov said patiently. "But what about yourself, doctor? How d'you feel?"

"In what sense?"

"Are you all right?"

"Who, me? Are you asking me?"

"Yes. I think you're ill."

"It's nonsense and downright foolishness. It's outrageous," Volodya said, articulating his words with care. "And doctor Tsvetkov is perfectly right: it's outrageous in our day and age to perform an operation of this type without an X-ray. Am I making myself clear, comrades? It's outrageous."

He sat down.

He was given some water which he tried to drink without removing his mask. He could not do it, of course. It seemed an enormous joke. Still muttering repeatedly: "It's outrageous," he lay down on the bench, and immediately a warm, rolling, indefinite something bore down on him, smothering him with its insupportable weight. . . .

I'm Tired of Loving You

How do you do,

Do you still remember me?

I'm writing to you in the middle of the night in the anteroom of our operating theatre. I scrubbed it clean, this dugout of ours, washed everything and then had a snooze.

And then I woke up and remembered that once I ordered you to kiss my hand, and with this hand I'm writing you a letter which I'll never mail, because one must not write to a character who has jilted one and who, secure in his faraway "abroad", is evading his military duty.

Oh no, Volodya, I'll never think that of you.

I'd sooner die than think that you're capable of evading anything, my darling giraffe. I know how stubbornly you've been

going straight at things all your life. How hard it's making everything for you, and how much harder it's going to be yet! Oh no, if there's one thing you haven't got, it's streamlining which would enable you to move smoothly through life. Why even my dad once wrote about you, after we'd heard about the plague, I mean, that *our* Volodya (he still calls you our ...) and he said that you're the sort of person whose life can't be easy and whose fate is none too easy either.

And now do you want to hear how I became a nurse?

If you do, then just sit down quietly and listen, which is not in your line either. You never listened to me, you know, it was I who listened to you. And whenever I tried to talk to you, you screwed up your face as if you had a splitting headache. But even that I loved in you, because I realised: he has a right to screw up his face, he is much bigger, more unique than you. He is your superior.

Well then, listen, my superior.

I wrote my daddy twenty-nine letters and left them in Moscow (the address is Prosvirin Pereulok) with a very obliging woman I know, who promised me to mail one letter a week. All the envelopes were numbered, so for twenty-nine weeks daddy wouldn't have to worry about his sweet, beloved, one and only daughter.

And then I went to the enlistment office and got assigned, without any entreaties on my part at all, to a certain unit with which I departed north.

From the train we were moved to a barn.

What we formed was a laundry squad. Do you know what that is?

It means that we washed clothes.

Tons of washing began arriving on sleighs and carts at our barnhouse laundry, not far from Loukhi, a small railway station. Truckfuls, sleighfuls and cartfuls of washing. There was so much of it—the horrible grey, foully smelling underwear of fighting men. We had a lame boy in our squad, Shura Kravchuk. He had the greatest difficulty in enlisting, and the job he was given was checking in the washing. He spent all day in the barn, where the air was always heavy with old sweat, decay and human excretions. At first, the sight of those mountains of washing, those enormous bales and bundles, "plunged me into the abyss of despair," as they say in novels. But the washing came pouring in and pouring in, and our Shura Kravchuk would be

quite snowed under. Sometimes you could not even see him behind it, and when I came into the barn I'd hallo to him as if we were in a virgin forest.

"Shurik, where are you?" I'd yell. "Shu-rik!"

"I'm to the left of you! I'll try to climb out in a minute," he'd answer, stuttering. "I'm coming Varya, wait!"

In that long ago when I was still an actress, we used to man-icure our hands regularly, the "sentimental tank" and I. It seems ridiculous here. My fingers got puffy, the skin took on a glassy sheen, my palms became calloused, and the joints swollen.

The pots in which we boiled the clothes before we started washing them stood in our barn. It was always damp there, the floor was flooded with dirty water, a sticky yellow fog never seemed to clear, and if anything, the smell was thicker than in Shurik's barn.

We washed the clothes in ordinary tubs. The washing machines we were supposed to have got sent to the wrong destination by mistake, and so we were given a talk instead, to the effect that we shouldn't be the slaves of machinery but should show what we're worth.

Shurik's muttered comment was that it would be nice to meet up with the muddler responsible for sending the machines heaven knows where and see him doing the washing in a tub himself. The washing machines were only redirected to us three weeks later, by the way. Unfortunately, in real life such hopes never materialise—we did the washing in the tubs, and the muddler, as we found out afterwards, was the person who guided us in our work!

Gosh, how awful it was, Volodya darling!

Our backs, shoulders, arms, and just everything, ached all night long. Our girls moaned and groaned in their sleep, I felt so sorry for them, I was dying to beat up the ugly mug of that idiot who was to blame for our washing machines going astray.

However, we got plenty of moral support from him.

He explained to us that war was not a party, nor was it a jolly picnic, no, war was war, and it had its own hardships. . . .

Oh, to hell with him anyway!

I've got quite a collection by now of his "explaining" sort, but I never feel like brooding on them long, just as I never want to think of those men through whose fault this war is so hard on us women.

But there's no helping it, you've got to hear about it.

They make speeches, these people, they hail us and call us their comrades-in-arms, they do their duty as soldiers should, they fight properly too, but you can't walk past without one of those braves pinching you, squeezing you, pushing up to you, and saying something caressingly insulting, something that humiliates you, it's so essentially shabby. And it's considered all right, there's no punishment for this, you can't even complain about it to anyone, because you'll only have everyone laughing at you, and they'll only be too glad to say that you're simply putting on airs, and making a fuss because you can't take a joke, it's all good clean fun, no harm meant. I'm not grumpy by nature, nor am I a prude, I've seen a lot of life by now, but there were times when I cried for hours on end because it seemed so unfair that people weren't court-martialed for this. Because, Volodya, we volunteered at the call of our hearts, forgive the high-sounding expression. We did what we had to do and we'll go on doing what we have to do, but our superiors must neither allow this humiliation nor turn a blind eye to it.

But do you know what the most infuriating thing was?

I spoke about it at a meeting once. I was shaking all over with rage, and I told them nothing but the truth. And as a result it was I who got it in the neck. Our laundry boss spouted a long and passionate speech in which he called me a slanderer, and declared that I was a disgrace to the squad and that no soldier would ever *permit* himself, and so on and so forth in the same vein. The other girls kept mum, and so did Shurik, the only man we could rely on, and he even tried to avoid my eyes. A friendly piece of advice was offered me afterwards. "You were too hard on them, Varya girl, we're in the army, after all. Softly does it."

Oh, Volodya darling, how right you were sometimes: one must not be soft! I didn't understand it then, but I do now. . . .

And d'you know what I think: when the war is over and books about it appear, someone, perhaps an ex-signal girl, a traffic-girl, a laundress, or a waitress will be sure to write about it. I don't suppose the nurses and woman doctors know very much about this seamy side of our life. It's the wounded with them, and you men are such lambs when you're ill, you have such a touching way of calling "nursie!" and thanking everyone so piteously for "saving your life", that no one would ever believe what that meek convalescent had been like when he was in good form. . . .

I hate you, damned double-faced beasts!

And probably you're no better than the rest.

I can just see you there among the local belles. "May I have this dance, milady?" However, you don't dance, I think. You didn't—that I do know, but you've probably learnt now in some nightclub or other. And having plastered down your hair and squeezed your feet into patent leather shoes, you bleat: "Oh, my dear!"

Disgusting!

Still, it wasn't really too bad in that squad of ours.

True, the war passed us by except for the air raids on Loukhi. That poor station was bombed umpteen times a day. But for the most part the Fritzes gained nothing from it because the rails were put back in order very quickly and soon troop trains, hospital trains and heavy Pullmans came roaring past us again.

Our washing machines arrived at last, and the work became much easier. We also learned to iron quickly and well. Besides that we mended and darned, singing as we sat working in our barn.

D'you know, it's rather nice when you think of it now: the red-hot iron stove, a smell of freshly ironed clothes, the girls singing and Shurik, his eyes half-closed, ecstatically conducting the choir with a stick.

*All alone, I walk into the darkness.
Through the vapour shines the flinty sod,
And the stars are seeking one another,
And the silent world attends to God.*

And that, Vladimir Afanasyevich, is one stage of my army life.

Rather, that stage is past, I've entered upon the next stage now, because a rather fine man has fallen in love with me.

Never mind if it hurts you, but people do fall in love with me pretty often. I don't know why they do, I never encourage them or anything. Different people fall in love with me and they all do it differently. When they fall in love, their stares become as intelligent as a sheep's, they first begin to drop hints, then a proposal inevitably follows, and after that, when I tell them what I think, they get angry. It puzzles most of them why I don't reciprocate their feeling. And I'm both amused and ashamed. You know I've made my choice once and for all.

Honestly, how could I tell them?

Who would take me seriously if I said: You haven't an earthly. I love comrade Ustimenko, but he left me many years ago.

However, that's what I did say to Major Kozyrev. That rather fine person is he. And he's about fifteen years my senior too.

He heard me out and said, the way they do in novels: "I'll wait as long as you wish."

And I said: "I don't want you to wait for me."

And then he said: "You can't forbid me to wait, you know. And besides, I promise not to bother you. We shall be good friends, that's all. This you will permit, I hope?"

Now what could I say to him after that?

He's good looking, Volodya dear, he's tall and broad-shouldered, and his hair is turning grey on the temples. All our girls are crazy about him. If you want the honest truth, he's better looking than you. And he doesn't have your stupid stubbornness, your touchiness and your flair for leaving someone without a backward glance. He would glance back, you may be sure of that, and not just once or twice. And, darling, if you only knew how thoughtful my Major Kozyrev is. . . .

It would do you a world of good to train under him for a month or two.

Only I don't suppose you'd learn anything from him: you're the way you are, and there's no breaking you in. It's not that you're inconsiderate, you're just too busy. And Kosyrev is an absolutely free man in his spare time. He likes both the sound and the meaning of the word leisure. Whereas you, my giraffe, don't even know what leisure is. It's like this with people of your special mould: the freer you are from work, the busier you are inside, or does this sound stupid? What I mean to say is that for all your unquestionable merits you're anything but a harmoniously developed man. A harmoniously developed man loves poetry and all the arts, he loves nature and of course he loves sport, he plays chess, or "pawns" as you once had the cheek to call it, or perhaps he is keen on fishing and hunting and wouldn't mind taking up aviation sport. And you, my lop-sided darling? I still remember how hopeless you were, poor thing, at doing nothing and enjoying this idleness, and I also remember you complaining once that your brain got as tired physically as a blacksmith's arms or a sprinter's legs. Remember, dear? And the best thing about Kozyrev is that his brain will never get tired, though he's quite brainy. He is harmoniously developed. He does not overwork his intellect and he's always even-tempered and composed, reasonably self-confident and reasonably exacting towards himself.

"I'm a man with a zest for living," he says. "And nothing human is alien to me."

Does all this interest you?

He makes a marvellous figure of a fearless commander who has seen and experienced everything.

"There's nothing we haven't been through," he says, and it's quite true.

He's been in the Khalkhin-Gol, Khasan and Mannerheim Line fighting, and now he's had six months of this, oh so difficult war. He wears his medals conspicuously, but with good taste, and you can always see them on him even when he has his cape on. It's an art, which my daddy has never mastered. Remember? Well, what else? The cut of his uniform is beautiful, and the driver who usually brings him here worships his major, but there's not a hint of familiarity in his attitude, he salutes smartly and says: "Yes, comrade major". He stands at attention, his hand raised to his side-cap and says: "Yes, comrade major", "Right you are, sir" and so on.

And so, Volodya darling, I ran away from Major Kozyrev.

Never once, in all these long months of war, did I ask a favour of anyone, and here I went to the medical administration of the front, found Dr. Shatilov—he's the division surgeon, daddy's old friend who was in Spain with him. He knew your father very well too, and now he's our biggest, biggest chief—well, I got him to receive me and asked him to transfer me anywhere he liked, but the farther the better.

"Farther from the fighting?" he asked me sternly.

"Oh no, from our squad."

"Why?"

It would have been silly to explain. So I said nothing. He wrote something on a piece of paper and stuck it in his cigarette case, it's a habit he's got.

"So you're Varvara Stepanova?" he asked me.

"Yes, sir."

"What's your father's name?"

He simply bored into me with his eyes. Maybe he knew, or maybe he had guessed.

"Your father's name?"

"Rodion Mefodyevich."

He examined my face for a long time in silence.

"Silly, cruel little beast! And a mean one besides!" he said most unpleasantly. "Aren't you ashamed of yourself for deceiv-

ing your father? Do you know that he came to Moscow two days after you had bolted and read all the letters, the whole batch, you had laid in store? He passed through here on his way the other day, I went to meet the train, and he waved to me with those letters."

He made a pause for breath.

"The cheek of you! If I were a civilian I'd box your ears for you! Oh stop blubbing, it's a disgusting sight, you're a soldier after all! Sit down and write your father a penitent letter."

He made me sit down at his desk and gave me some paper and a pen.

"My Nina has run away too," he said after a while.

"Nina who?"

"My daughter. From Sverdlovsk. Rumour has it that she's training to be a paratrooper. Who knows, maybe she's behind enemy lines already. We've been left by our old lonesome selves, my wife and I. When you've finished we'll go home to dinner."

I finished my letter, he added a few lines, corrected my spelling mistakes, and took me to the house in the village where he and his wife were billeted.

"Meet Nina No. 2," he said to his wife. "She's the daughter of Rodion Stepanov, the naval officer, you remember? Box her ears for her, Olyona, it's awkward for me to do it since I'm her military commander, and in the service, I'm sorry to say, corporal punishment is strictly forbidden."

It was a silent meal. Shatilov tried to joke at first, but his wife sat gazing at me with tear-filled eyes, thinking, I suppose, about her Nina. Presently he grew moody too. And I thought of my mother and, d'you know, I felt terribly sorry for her. How is she making out under the Germans, all by herself, and so impractical, spoilt and erratic? Is she alive? And how terribly lonely she must be—it's too awful to imagine.

Well, I went away.

I went far away—as a nurse in a mobile surgical unit.

I ran away from Kozyrev, Volodya, from the polite, considerate, handsome, and easy-to-be-with Major Kozyrev.

You see how true I am to you, my darling?

And you don't appreciate it! And you never will! You'll never understand!

Still you should understand. Sometimes we feel so lonely, lost and helpless, we so need a bit of sympathy from a strong steady man, a little attention, the way Kozyrev offers it: "I heard you

scolding Shurik for spilling your tooth powder, so I've brought you a box. Take it, do, I've got more in stock. . . ."

Someone to care, to think about you!

You want someone to know that you wear a size 33, that high boots don't come in this size and you can't do without high boots. You want that someone—blushing and begging your pardon, and even giggling inanely—to hand you a pair made over from his own size 44 with the co-operation of the sappers' bootmaker, and you want that someone to know that you, being in the army, realise how anything but simple it was for him to ask his bootmaker to do the job. Understand? You want someone to lavish the riches of his soul on you, on caring for you, on thoughts about your comfort, and you want him to think about you when you are not there.

I think that many unhappy marriages are stumbled into because of this—this warm concern, which is often mistaken for love and which perhaps is love, but which you can't repay with love.

I'm miserable, Volodya.

My attitude to Kozyrev sadly lacks clarity and decision.

I felt lonely and blue, and he . . . but what do you care about it.

Good luck.

I didn't even write to Kozyrev.

And I'm not going to.

I'm not going to write to you either, my dearest of humans, not for a long time. This idea of mine of writing letters I'll never mail is no good. They don't relieve my misery, they make it harder for me. I shall now begin to forget you. It'll be hard work, of course, but I shall make an effort. The fact that fate has willed it that I should become involved in the medical profession, even though to a very slight extent, will get in my way very badly, but that, too, will pass.

By the way, when Kozyrev found out that I was a geologist he tried to persuade me to join the engineers.

He's far away from me now, and we'll probably never see each other again.

You and I will never see each other again either.

Good-bye.

I'm tired of loving you.

December, The Arctic.

Dr. Hugo Hummel's Sad Story

"I can't understand a thing!" Volodya said irritably and very loudly, he thought. "Is there anyone here?"

A tiny wavering tongue of flame, yellow and smoking, appeared in the pitch darkness of the overheated dugout.

"Next you'll be asking 'where am I?', came Tsvetkov's reply. "Where am I? 'What is it?' and then, as in a play I saw: 'Mummy, give me the sun!'"

Volodya did not say anything. Tsvetkov looked huge, incredibly broad-shouldered, fantastically enormous in his sheepskins and belts, with firearms hung all over him.

"Wait a minute, old chap, let me take all this off first. I've just staggered in, you see. . . ."

"Where from?"

"From the war. We're doing a bit of fighting. You haven't forgotten in your non-existence, have you, there's a war on just now?"

"No, I haven't forgotten. What exactly happened to me?"

"The devil alone knows," Tsvetkov replied, removing his weapons with a clatter. "In any case you weren't wounded, and as for a certain acute infectious disease, could it be diagnosed here? In any case, you almost kicked off. . . ."

"Not really?" Volodya said incredulously.

"Yes, really. So it's a very good thing that you've come to at last. . . ."

Placing his big, heavy palm on Volodya's wrist, he took his pulse, sighed and then told him that it was Vera Veresova who had nursed him back to health, spending her days and nights at his bedside.

"Finding me a disappointment, she switched over to you," he said with a quiet chuckle. "You're a man with a capital M, from her point of view. . . ."

Volodya heard him eating something and washing it down with loud gulps of water. The small yellow flame of the oil lamp danced slowly before his eyes. With a sigh he fell into a short doze again. Suddenly, on the very edge of sleep, he remembered his wounded, and starting up in alarm began to question Tsvetkov about every one of them with fretful, angry insistence. Tsvetkov replied in detail: they were all getting well, they were back in the ranks, all but Kislitsin whose collar-bone was giving him

trouble—they would see when Ustimenko recovered whether they should operate on him here or send him to the rear.

"Can you get a message through?" Volodya asked.

"Most certainly we can. This outfit is in earnest, it's not our dear old flying detachment, you know."

Volodya tried to arrange his reluctant thoughts. How long had he lain there, if even the gravely wounded had returned to the ranks?

"Quite long," Tsvetkov answered vaguely.

Neither spoke for a time.

"What about that German doctor? The one we operated on, remember?"

"He died," Tsvetkov replied after a pause during which he rolled and lit a cigarette. "Yes, our German's dead and buried."

Volodya closed his eyes: he still could not get used to the thought of death.

"What sort of person was he? Have you found out?"

"I'll tell you when you've come round," Tsvetkov promised him brusquely, and stretching out on his sheepskins fell into a sweet sleep.

Volodya was recovering at a sluggish pace. He felt no stronger, he could not eat, but his head was clear and his thoughts were orderly. Lying there all by himself for hours on end, he indulged in leisurely reflections.

There was so much to think about. Life, that seemed so simple only a short time ago, had suddenly become involved, filled to overflowing with new facts that would not fit into any pattern. People he once would have put with the good or the bad at a glance, appeared in a quite different light to him now, even more so than in Khara, and the person who engaged his thoughts mostly was Tsvetkov. Everything was mixed up in this man: the lofty and the base, the good and the bad, the real and the sham. Finding the corresponding little shelf for all the different things in Tsvetkov was so hopelessly difficult, that Volodya gave up, drawing but one conclusion that could not be clearer: the yardstick he used to apply to people was broken beyond repair, and he had not acquired a new one yet.

He thought about Kholodilin and about Vera, and studied the comrades who dropped in to see him from a new angle. And every time he became convinced that the labels he had stuck on them at first glance did not fit them at all, that is, if he

explored below skin depth. Kislitsin, for instance, was not at all the "old soldier, good soul and trusty friend" he had labelled him. Or rather, he was all that, but it was not this, the surface traits of character visible to all, that determined the man's calibre. Nor was Kolya Pinchuk, the Odessa boy, the "intrepid fighter", "the soul of the detachment", "the live wire" he appeared. He had trained himself to conceal the fact that he was afraid, he had taught himself to crack jokes quite mechanically, and the funny Odessa stories he told were not taken by him from life, but from plays and films. However, all these things put together were anything but a discredit to the boy, on the contrary they made him even better. He had cultivated these qualities, and made himself indispensable to the detachment. Volodya's label had proved erroneous in this case also. Ivan Telegin who looked so simple, was not simple at all. He always played up to his superiors, though his manner was rather offhand and all but impudent, he could tell what mood Tsvetkov was in and knew how to put him in a happier one, thus making things better for all of them, of course, but for himself in particular. Babichuk, for all his positive qualities, was a bit close-fisted. He always had some tobacco put away, knew how to look after himself, and by worrying about the needs of others was able to satisfy his personal wants first. Tsedunko, who looked the simplest of all, was actually the shrewdest of the lot, "he'd outwit himself if he could, he was so sly," Volodya discovered to his amazement. But his most important discovery was that all the men knew all about each other. They saw each other's good and bad points perfectly, and for all their jeering, baiting and bickering, they treated one another seriously, with respect and tolerance. However, all this was put in a nutshell by Pavel Kopytov, the former quarter-master of the former Death to Fascism detachment, drinking a cup of strong German ersatz coffee in Volodya's dugout one evening.

"We're not little angels with snow-white wings, you know," he said, a smile lurking behind his long-untrimmed grey moustache. "Angels dwell in the sky, up in the clouds. And we're just normal Soviet soldiers, or rather ordinary civilian workingmen. From what I see you expect a lot from a person, just as if he were really an angel. So I'll say this to you: if you look at it another way, even an angel couldn't have done what our men did on that march. The sweet angel would have turned

sour, even though he's so darned pure you can see right through him. And we're all right! We got here, we did what we set out to do. . . ."

Lbov came in to see Volodya one night when Vera was there with him. He only stayed a little while, his manner formal and coolly polite, to tell Volodya that he had decided to send him to Moscow since "his strange illness could not be brought under control in these conditions", and to inquire if there was anything the patient wanted. He then put two packets of Moscow made Luxe cigarettes on Volodya's blanket.

"But they're bad for him!" Vera said reproachfully.

"The war is even more so," Lbov said, smiling. "Incidentally, comrade doctor, I was a sick man before the war—I had ulcers, and there was something wrong with my heart. And now it's all gone without a trace. Can science explain this? And, by the way, I was sickest when I was writing my book. . . ."

"Are you a writer?" Volodya asked, surprised.

"Oh no, not really," Lbov said in some embarrassment. "I was the director of a state farm, and I got interested in chicken farming. When I had acquired sufficient experience, I felt I wanted to share it with people. . . ."

"About chickens, you mean?" Volodya's amazement was quite indecent now.

"Yes, of course," Lbov said a little huffily. "What's so surprising about it?"

"Nothing, I simply thought you were a regular armyman."

"I was that too," Lbov said, getting up to go.

"Chickens—and this strong clefted chin, state farm managing—and this splendid detachment of which the German's speak with awe! If that isn't strange, what is!" Volodya said to himself when the door banged shut after Lbov.

"What are you thinking so deeply about all the time?" Vera asked him.

"I'm wondering what's happened to Tsvetkov. It's now the second night he's been away," Volodya lied to her.

"Oh, he's gone with the pioneers, with the demolition men. He won't be left out of the fighting, you know, and then they will always have a job for a doctor. They're all crazy about him here, they can't praise him enough. . . ."

Her eyes glowed warmly, as they always did when she thought of Tsvetkov, but her next words sounded unnaturally stiff,

as if she were reading from an encyclopedia or an obituary notice.

"A singularly energetic, strong-willed man. He has a great future, don't you think so? An able surgeon of versatile talents, I know that from assisting him on several occasions, a brilliant organisation man who does everything on a breath-taking scale. It'll be a pity if he gets stuck here as a partisan surgeon for the rest of the war. I can see him doing very, very important work, filling a very, very important post. . . ."

Volodya stifled a yawn. He could never really understand Vera. What did she mean by his "getting stuck here"?

But she was already speaking of something else—of the flyer with the beautiful and bookish name, Kiril, who was in love with her. He was so clever, so good, and had such a generous heart—she said just that and actually repeated the two words, for that was the way she liked to talk. Next she told him that Kiril was a big baby like him.

"Why me?" Volodya demanded, suddenly getting angry.

"Oh, please don't argue!" she begged, pressing her fingertips to her temples the way women do when they have a headache. "Why must you always argue! We women know you much better than you do yourselves. Now you, for instance, will become a prominent scientist. You're anything but an organisation man, anything but a commander. You're the most typical of first discoverers, an absent-minded professor, a wee bit of a boor, a bit too mistrustful of human warmth, of sympathy. . . ."

"Why, she's just an ordinary tart!" Volodya thought, feeling bored, and exercising his right as a sick man said: "Please don't be angry, but I want to sleep."

She left, feeling a little angry just the same. A ravenous, happily noisy Tsvetkov lumbered in in the middle of the night. From one pocket he pulled out a German flask, from another some German tins, and from a third a handful of German dog biscuits. Without bothering to take off his sheepskins, he began to eat, crunching loudly and taking long pulls of rum straight from the flask; his eyes shining excitedly he told Volodya how they blew up a train, how the explosion lifted both the engines and turned them over, how the tank cars burst into flames and the gasoline went on burning for a long time, and how the partisans fired their submachine-guns and shot down the nazis.

"Any wounded?" Volodya asked.

"Wounded? Oh yes, a couple, mere scratches," Tsvetkov replied absent-mindedly. "But the Fritzies really got what was coming to them, they certainly did! There were four first-class coaches, one turned upside down, and the other three derailed. The Germans tried to climb out of the windows, but I think none got away."

"Listen, you promised to tell me about that German doctor, remember?" Volodya said.

"Oh that!" Tsvetkov frowned. "But you see it's such a crazy mess. It's difficult to think about such things in wartime; you start reflecting, and that's no help. It's not so bad for me, but for someone with a nature like yours it's plainly harmful, I imagine. . . ."

"Please don't worry about my political and moral integrity!"

"Showing your fangs at last?" Tsvetkov asked, peering into Volodya's face. "I always knew you had them. . . ."

Busy with his own thoughts, he smoked two of Volodya's cigarettes, and then took another drink of rum from the flask.

"Only please, good Doctor Haas," he begged, "keep it under your hat just now, will you? Understand?"

He took off his sheepskins, and stretched, flexing all the muscles of his big, strong body.

"It's not humane, Ustimenko," he grumbled. "I've come home from work, I need sleep, and you want me to tell you bedtime stories."

But Volodya saw that Tsvetkov was perfectly willing to tell him the story, that he was definitely going to tell him that night, that he could not help himself now.

And Tsvetkov did tell him.

It all began early in September. The baby grandson of a forest-guard's old widow who lived in a place called Razvilki fell ill. The boy's mother had been shot dead by a drunken German soldier, and his father was in the army. The old woman, frightened out of her wits, carried the dying baby in her arms to Zasnizhye, a village where a German unit was stationed, and seeing a fat man in a doctor's white coat standing in the front yard of her kinsman Levonty's house, she rushed in, fell on her knees and, wailing at the top of her voice, held the baby out to the fat German. This fat German was none other than our doctor Hummel, a pediatrician who specialised in child surgery. Having ex-

administered the baby right there in the front yard, he gave it an injection of diphtheria antitoxin and told the old woman to get out. He didn't speak a kind word to her, and "glared at her savagely" she said.

The child got well.

Afterwards, Hummel dropped in to see the old crone two or three times, supposedly on his way to shoot duck, and with that same "savage" expression on his face dropped some boxes of mixed cereal on the table so she could feed the child.

There was no such thing as medical services for the population in either Zasnizhyc or anywhere else in that district. The local doctor, a young Communist, had of course been hanged by the Hitlerites. The midwife and the feldsher had run away. A woman doctor had rented a cottage there for the summer and got stranded, but she was a Jew and so she was burnt alive by the Germans in a haymow.

News that the fat doctor had saved the grandchild of Levonty's kinswoman spread like wildfire through the countryside. And, naturally enough, mothers began to bring their sick children to Hummel—diphtheria was really raging there at the time. The fat and permanently disgruntled doctor never refused help to anyone. He frowned and glared, but he did give the children medical treatment and took neither "chicken nor pork fat" which are the peasants' customary gifts, hurling the offerings at those who dared offer him that fee.

There was another queer thing observable in Hummel's behaviour: he did not seem to mind it when they intercepted him on his way to shoot duck, but it annoyed him when people brought their sick babies to him at the hospital. The women, of course, drew the right conclusions from this, and thereafter refrained from seeking Hummel out in the village except in cases of really dire emergency, intercepting him instead, as if by accident, where the old highway made a sharp turn, taking him afterwards back to the village via back alleys. . . .

It was all very queer, even though the smarter peasants had an explanation for it: Hummel, they said, had secret orders from his propaganda department to alleviate the sufferings of the children, and thus keep the grateful farm folk from contacting the partisans and doing other things disagreeable to the Germans. But if this was right, why did Hummel prefer to treat the children secretly and not openly? Whatever the Germans did for

propaganda purposes they did not just openly but with a great blowing of trumpets.

There was still another queer thing in Hummel's behaviour: although he went shooting so often, he never got anything, he must have been a lousy shot. When one of the grateful mothers made him a gift of a black grouse, he accepted it gladly, tying it to his belt as if he had just shot it himself. After that the fat doctor was invariably presented with game which he always accepted and then bragged to his fellow Germans what a crack shot he was. The peasants knew about it, of course, but kept their mouths shut. By that time it was no longer a secret to many of them that Hummel was afraid of his feldsher and chose to conceal from him the great number of patients he had.

Another curious fact was that every time Hummel went duck shooting he carried with him a set of surgical instruments, a hypodermic syringe with an assortment of needles, and quite a big variety of medicines.

Still, the people did not trust Hummel completely. It was even whispered that the children he inoculated were anyway doomed to die in convulsions in less than a year, and that slow but sure death like that was a new invention of the Germans. No one knows who set that rumour going, but spread it did, and one mother actually refused to let Hummel "stick a needle" in her child, and asked for a powder instead. Hummel roughly pushed the mother aside, gave her a piece of his mind and inoculated the child in spite of her protests.

But then something happened. True, no more than two or three people in Zasnizhye knew about it, but nevertheless it cleared the queer, fat German of all suspicions that he was as low a swine as all the other fascists.

It was like this.

On the night of November 9th, Lbov's men made an attempt to capture an identification prisoner in the ravine outside Zasnizhye. Although the night was dark and cold, with both rain and snow, Lbov's men were detected. The Germans alerted a whole battalion, and the partisans had to retreat. In their haste they failed to pick up one of their men, Grishka Panfutyev. He fainted when a volley of explosive bullets made a bloody mess of his leg and rolled down the sheer side of the ravine into a thick fir-grove.

Shortly before daybreak, when the night was darkest, Panfutyev came to, and clenching his teeth because he wanted to

scream and howl from the excruciating pain, he started crawling to the village, past the old hulling mill, with only his angry determination to get him there. There in the house lived a widow with whom, as Panfutyev himself put it, he had "certain relations". This widow hid her lover in the cellar, after doing her incompetent best for his wounds.

She tried but failed to get in touch with the partisans. And anyway Lbov's men would hardly have helped her in those first few days when the fascist battalion, alarmed by the sudden appearance of a strong partisan detachment was combing all the approaches to Zasnizhye as pedantically and thoroughly as Germans are wont to do things. And meanwhile, Panfutyev's leg was not healing, on the contrary his condition was deteriorating. Grishka, the fearless, shock-headed daredevil was dying.

And then the widow decided to risk it. Telling Grishka what she planned to do and placing his hand grenade and pistol within his reach, she went out and intercepted Hummel on his way to shoot duck. She told him that her "baby" was dying, that he had "festering sores on his poor little leg", and brought the fat, puffing and scowling doctor to her house. Somewhat surprised to hear that the sick baby was in the cellar, and saying it was very bad and stupid, the doctor went down the slippery steps. As a matter of fact Hummel understood and even spoke a little Russian which he remembered from those days long past when as a very young doctor he had been kicked out of Ukraine by the Bogun and Tarashchan regiments of Bozhenko and Shchors.

"Very bad, stupid!" he repeated, reaching the bottom of the stairs and sizing up the situation at once.

Grishka lay staring at the German with a feverish, drunken look. In his hand he held his pistol. The widow picked up the hand grenade.

"There!" she said, too overcome to explain anything.

Picture the face of a loving woman at a moment like that!

Hummel, mopped his sweating face, sat down and shaking his head began to examine his patient.

"What a big baby!" he said not without humour. "Colossal."

He went away to get his instruments, he could not simply take them, he had to steal them for reasons which I'll give later. Nor was it an easy thing for him to get away again and come back to the widow's house. And there were Panfutyev and the widow waiting for him—those hours of waiting are another thing to

picture: he, almost unconscious, and she—holding a hand grenade.

At last the German reappeared. He incised the abscesses successfully, at any rate Grishka was in a good condition when he was eventually sent to Moscow. After that, the fat German came again—his patient was now able to hold both the pistol and the hand grenade.

Hummel was much nicer to this patient of his than to any others. He would tease him: "Aren't you big for a baby! The naughty little baby boy!" And once he advised him not to play with the toys he was holding because they might go off.

"If you put those son-of-a-bitches of yours on my trail, Herr Doctor, they certainly will go off. And how!" Grishka told him grinning. "I won't spare myself, remember that!"

"You big, silly baby! Very silly!" Hummel said to him.

The fat doctor did not put the son-of-a-bitches on his trail. He also refused to take the two fat chickens the widow brought him to his place telling her brutally that if he felt like it he'd take the whole village and her too.

She was astounded, it was so unlike him, but later she remembered that his feldsher had been present—that slim, bright-eyed youngster whom the villagers hated more than all the other Germans, for there was talk that he had shot a lot of people just to amuse himself.

As it afterwards transpired, it was this feldsher that Hummel feared most, and with good reason. Feldsher Erich Hertz had reported his chief's suspicious conduct to the appropriate quarters more than once, and his orders were to watch him carefully, considering that Hummel's service record was far from faultless.

And Hertz watched him zealously.

He did not know anything about Grishka Panfutyev, he had simply been outwitted in this case, but his sixth sense told him that it was not only children that fat Dr. Hummel visited, that something much more important was going on, and that if he informed the right quarters about it he would be both noticed and rewarded.

And so the bright-eyed feldsher began to probe. He did not really discover anything, but he reported all the rumours.

Hummel was taken away to the Gestapo.

He denied the charges of helping Russian partisans, but as for the children, he admitted his fault—yes, he was guilty. Yes, he had inoculated them against diphtheria. It was blameworthy, he

realised that, and he would gladly pay the cost of the vaccine out of his own pocket and let it be his contribution towards the Winter Aid fund. He was guilty, but begged clemency—the sufferings of children were unbearable to him.

The Obersturmführer of the SS—a young man with excellent manners, suddenly asked: "Tell me, Herr Doctor, why did you take your field surgical kit with you when you went to visit a patient on November 18th of this year? 'Who was that patient?' I assure you this whole business is most distasteful to me, and I'm anxious to put an end to it. Write me an explanatory note, we'll verify the facts and will not trouble you again. . . ."

"But I did not take my field kit along with me that day!" Dr. Hummel protested, turning a sickly yellow under the Obersturmführer's calm stare. "It's a misunderstanding!"

Well, in effect, that was all.

The prelude to the story ends there.

They let the fat doctor go with the following exhortation: "We have no formal grounds for your immediate arrest, Herr Doctor. We must complete our investigation of your case, and we will complete it. We shall subject to a special interrogation all persons however remotely connected with whomsoever you have had connections. Do you understand me? It will be like circles on the water, as taught to us by Reichsführer Himmler of the SS. It would be most desirable for us to prove wrong, for this case has no precedent in the army of the Reich. I myself do not wholly believe in this, shall I say conjectural, fact. However, you did take the instruments along and performed an operation with them—they had never been used once before November 18th. Perhaps you will tell us the truth yourself now?"

Hummel told them nothing, and left.

The next day, the SS men took away old Levonty. The Obersturmführer's threat of spreading circles on the water was not a vain one. Hummel well knew what a special interrogation meant. Scores of perfectly innocent people might be brutally tortured to death. This unprecedented case of Medical Officer Hummel, a traitor and Bolshevik, would be brought to the knowledge of Gestapo's topmost chiefs so they would notice and, naturally, reward the modest Obersturmführer for exposing a crime disgracing the army of the Reich.

The machine started working, and Hummel realised that this mincing machine of the Gestapo would come to a stop only in the event of his, Hugo Hummel's, disappearance.

He simply could not bring himself to commit suicide.
Should he confess?

No, that was not what he wanted. He wanted to tell someone about it. He simply had to tell. And it was because he wanted to tell someone that he was unable to kill himself.

On the second night after Levonty had been taken away, Hummel knocked on the widow's door and begged her to put him in touch with the other partisans. Otherwise he would be hanged, he explained to her by gesture.

"No good," he said to her in broken Russian.

"No, it isn't good," the widow answered, drawing her shawl more tightly around her shivering shoulders.

Before daylight, Hummel's request was reported to Lbov.

Lbov knew the prelude to this story, and so he named the place and the hour for a rendezvous with the fat German. He was to be met by one of their scouts, Manya Sherstnyuk, a smart, brave girl, with Lbov's boys keeping guard.

At the appointed hour Hummel—carrying his hunting gun slung on his shoulder and wearing a cartridge belt, appeared on the edge of the forest near the old Karachayevo Highway. Everything went well up till the minute it dawned on the bright-eyed Hertz, trailing his chief through the fir grove, just where this clumsy, stupid old fool, as he thought him, was really heading. When it did dawn on him, he fired his sniper-scope rifle. He was a crack shot for he had had a good deal of practise when, firing at long range, he'd killed a number of Zasnizhye boys and men as they sat fishing on the lake shore.

Manya Sherstnyuk and the boys put a couple of bullets into Erich Hertz, but that did not help old Hummel any: he died.

"What was the thing he wanted to tell someone?" Volodya asked when Tsvetkov paused to light a cigarette. "He was set on telling something, wasn't he. But what?"

"A lot of things."

"What things?"

"Wait a bit, I want a breathing spell."

But he began to speak at once, smiling at something.

"Everyone has his own little joys. Can you imagine what Hummel's was when he was dying and knew he was dying? He did realise it, you know. What delighted him was that the Gestapo officer with the excellent manners, that Obersturmführer who had staked his career on the case of the traitor Hummel must be

scared stiff that he let Hummel get away after having himself started the case. The old chap was tickled at the thought. It was also a joy to know that Hertz had been killed. He told us some interesting things about Germany, about their informer system, with everyone informing against everyone else. "Every third man is the ears of Hitler, and every second man—of Himmler," he used to say.

"Never mind that," Volodya broke in impatiently. "It's all very interesting, but it's not the main thing. The main thing is why he did what he did, your Hummel I mean. There must have been some reason. It wasn't simply kindness, he wasn't being a good Doctor Haas, to use your pet expression. What was the deeper reason?"

"It's very complicated, the whole thing," Tsvetkov said reluctantly. "Most complicated. He told me that he was in the German army on the Somme when those bastards launched their gas attack. He remembered that attack, that one notorious volley that was not followed by a second one. Well, he went off the deep end. That's when he got his. . ."

"Did he serve a term?"

"He did, and then they demoted him, but later they forgave him and sent him off to the Ukraine. And again German atrocities, this and that, you know. They've a famous song they've been singing since 1812: 'Your fatherland must become greater still!' That's what Hummel told me: greater still. But the strangest part begins from here."

"What?"

"He told me that it wasn't compassion alone that made him do those things for the sick children. 'We have been trained to feel no human emotions,' he explained to me. The main reason why he did it was because he loved his country. It was worth taking the risk for Germany's sake—those were his words."

"I don't quite get it."

"It's plain enough." Tsvetkov leaned closer to Volodya and said: "This is how Hummel explained it all to me, he said: 'When this frenzy of brutality has passed, when you have learned everything about fascism that you do not know yet, and there is very little you do know, practically nothing, the whole world, all mankind will come to hate our great people. The nation will bear the blame for the horror of fascism in its entirety. It will never occur to anyone that in those ten-odd years Hitler and his

crew broke the nation's spine in exactly the same way as Hertz, the feldsher, broke mine. No one will have the courage to say it, no one will stand up in defence of the people, no one will say a kind word about a single German.' This is how the fat Dr. Hummel saw it: 'I am risking my life, of course, by doing what my conscience, or that ersatz thing which now serves me in place of genuine conscience, tells me to do. But then my life is a small thing in comparison with the miracle of a Russian peasant woman suddenly saying a few years hence, in the very heat of that hatred for our entire nation: 'There was one good German, a doctor. A real person he was'."

"How well he said that!" Volodya said with a soft sigh. "A real person!"

"Yes, a real person." Tsvetkov repeated after him.

Suddenly a guarded, suspicious look came into his eyes, he pulled off his felt boots, poured himself a glass of rum, and then, as if to drive away his importunate thoughts, said: "To hell with all that!"

"Are there any more like him, do you think?" Volodya asked in a low voice.

"I knew it!" Tsvetkov exploded, "I was sure you'd ask that, you Doctor Haas, damn you. You're such a kind-hearted milk-sop, you'd love to wallow in thoughts like that and slobber and whine. No bloody fear! I refuse to discuss it, I refuse to think of it as the nation of Goethe and Heine! And you can go to hell, you and your ideas. . ."

"All right, don't yell," Volodya said, looking straight into the other's eyes. "You think as I do, but you're afraid of such thoughts. But why should we be afraid? Don't we know that a fascist is one thing, and a German is another? Is it any news to us? And does our Soviet state hold a different view?"

"I'm terribly tired," Tsvetkov, who never complained, said plaintively, and blew out the light. "I'm going to sleep."

But he did not fall asleep for a long time—Volodya heard him move as he lay thinking. There was a great deal to ponder over, and, strangely, Dr. Hummel's sad story had been somehow reassuring. He felt something like relief, and life appeared simpler.

And two days later, when night fell, Volodya, who was still feeling very weak, was taken in a low and wide sledge to a meadow where fires laid in a rectangle with one in the centre marked the landing strip. While waiting for the plane, Kolya

Pinchuk entertained him with Sovinformburo communiques, which Volodya already knew by heart, and sweet legends about top-secret operations successfully carried out by Red Army tank units "right inside the fascist den". Volodya knew it was sheer rubbish, but Kopytov, who had also come to see him off, nodded his head in such vigorous support and begged him to keep it under his hat with such a profound air of secrecy, that Volodya had not the heart to argue.

"They've had some temporary success around these parts," Pinchuk continued. "But we gave it to them hot and strong in the Munich-Köln area. They won't forget that in a year of Sundays. New machines have been put into action, it is true, Vladimir Afanasyevich. I know for sure. It's a manoeuvring war, new weapons, new strategy: you think you've got hold of my legs but in the meantime I screw your nut off."

The plane landed at dawn, when they no longer expected it to come at all. Tsvetkov, looking gloomy, and Ivan Telegin helped Volodya into the "rumble seat" as Babichuk called it, the propellers began to whirl again, whipping up the snow, the plane made one circle and then set course for Moscow.

The only passengers were the wounded, Vera Veresova who was escorting them, and Ustimenko. He sat apart from the rest so they would not catch his unidentified disease.



Chapter 4

Valentina Fyodorova

Aglaya Petrovna was led to the Gestapo by an infantry sergeant major. He had green shoulder pieces and a shield-shaped patch of black, white and red on his helmet. "They even alerted the infantry to catch me," she thought wearily. "Wasn't the SD enough?" The sergeant major's face was long and white, and his eyes lurked behind thick, round rimless lenses. Aglaya had seen such faces in foreign films—they belonged to kindly clergymen, dedicated schoolteachers, and charitable country doctors as differing from money-grabbing doctors. . . .

Her escort, besides the sergeant major in glasses, included four privates armed with Schmeissers and as many police dogs, Alsations, specially trained to hunt people. The dogs' whiskers were white with hoarfrost, and the one she had so foolishly tried to strangle back there where the village road turned, was still cough-

ing. Each time it coughed its master—one of the SD privates with a Schmeisser—shook his head and patted the dog as if telling it to bear up and not lose heart. And the sergeant major grimaced commiseratingly.

The Germans walked fast. Aglaya tried to keep up with the sergeant major's broad, measured stride so they would not torture her. Still, she did fall behind again and again, and then the young private with the yellow shoulder straps who brought up the rear kicked her in the shins very painfully, expertly and matter-of-factly.

On the way they were joined by several men from the so-called extermination groups of the SA—burly, fat-faced, jolly, blue-eyed Aryans. They, too, had spent the whole of that day hunting those "bloody partisans" in the Bugayevsky woods but had not caught a single one, whereas the sergeant major had. Aglaya heard the SD privates tell the merf how brazen-faced this Russian slut was, how she had spat venom at them and scratched, how much trouble she had been, and how she pretended that her papers were O.K. but they'd see how O.K. she was after they were through with her.

"Trust them to do their damndest," Aglaya thought in anguish.

Once they got to the control post, where the road forked, they seemed to forget all about her. The sergeant major sat on his haunches in front of the Alsatian watching it, as grunting with pain, it swallowed little pieces of meat. The other soldiers stood about smoking, and it was obvious from their expressions that they were both angry and worried about the dog. "Heavens, what's the matter with me?" Aglaya thought suddenly. "They're not the infantry at all, they're mountain troops. The colour of the infantry is white." It still seemed to her that any information she might collect here would come in useful later on.

The duty officer watched the fuss over the dog rather ironically at first, but when they told him how much it cost the Reich to rear and train one of those Alsations, he immediately went into the next room and came back with a medicine chest stocked with a large assortment of ointments, pills and mixtures.

A small lorry with bars on the windows and a compartment for dogs arrived about forty minutes later. It brought an officer, a person with a solid round belly and solid round cheeks. He was most probably a vet. Pulling on a rubber glove, he felt about

in the dog's mouth, turning his head to listen the way musicians do to the sound of their instruments. He announced that no particular damage had been done and they could continue on their way. And again they began to talk about the cold and how many degrees below zero it was going to be tomorrow, and what an unbearable thing this Russian frost was.

The vet got into the lorry beside Aglaya, and gave her a side-long look. She sat thinking and breathing into her cupped hands. In the compartment to the left of her, the dogs were moving about restlessly and growling. It was windy and cold.

"Where did she come from, this she-devil?" the vet asked.

"Jumped from a plane," the sergeant major replied. "Figuratively speaking, she came from heaven, though she won't admit it."

"She's no chicken, but still not too bad."

"Too skinny. Not my type," the sergeant major said. "But she'll do for the men."

"And the parachute?" asked the vet.

"We never found it," the sergeant major sighed. "To hell with it. She'll give a full account of it herself. The Obersturmführer doesn't need any material evidence. If they refuse to talk there's no making them, material evidence or no."

He straightened the helmet on his egg-shaped head and said a word in praise of the knitted liner.

"If it weren't for this marvellous invention we'd all perish here," he said. "I'm quite sure."

"And I'm not," said the vet. "I'm not sure about anything. Not anything at all!"

"And about you being you?"

"Of course not!" the vet exclaimed. "The only thing I am sure about is the lack of reality in the universe. Please knock on the driver's cab, I've got to get off here, it's Chorny Yar."

"Imagine!" thought Aglaya. "It's so long since I was here last. Xenia Nikolayevna would be glad, she wouldn't be afraid, I'm sure. It's here I was supposed to come. And now I never will. Never."

The vet got off. The lorry shot out of the forest and began to speed across fields. The icy wind raised wave upon wave of whirling snow which whistled through the chinks of the wooden sides and chilled the men through. They turned up their collars and drew their heads in. Even the dogs began to whimper miserably.

"How did this happen?" Aglaya asked herself. "I've got to think, check everything, and prepare my answers now."

And once again, for the countless time that day, she went over all her actions, trying to reconstruct the sequence of events beginning from the moment when Nikolai Ilyich and two men from his detachment, having escorted her to the highway, said goodbye to her, explaining thoroughly and in minute detail which way to go, where to turn off the road, and how avoid the German control post to get to Chorny Yar. No, no, she had made no slip anywhere, she had followed directions carefully and being mistaken for a parachutist was just bad luck, a stupid coincidence. Besides there could have been no parachutists that day, either men or women. She would have known had any been expected. And why drop people in the forest when they had a good landing site with which Moscow was familiar?

Just a stupid accident of war!

And the dog? Maybe she ought not to have tried to strangle it. But anyone would put up a fight if suddenly pounced on by a monster like that! She must have screamed from fright, too. She couldn't have helped screaming.

However, she should not waste thought on this.

She should concentrate on what was coming.

A quick smile touched her still youthful, chapped lips, flashed for a moment in her eyes, lighting up her high cheekbones chapped by the frosty wind—the smile appeared for a second to bring back the Aglaya Ustimenko of old. It came and went, perhaps never to come back.

Wasn't it silly to brood on what was awaiting her?

It was in the past that something or someone had always awaited her, or she herself had looked forward to something.

She remembered the bureau meeting of the Regional Party Committee where a battle had awaited her for funds to get the building of the forest school for TB children, which was her own idea, started. She remembered Krinichny, his eyes popping very comically, suddenly shouting: "Where'll I get those hundreds of thousands for you? Take her away, comrades, I'm going to have a stroke in a minute! Take her away!"

And then the opening of the forest school had awaited her. Those were warm and windy summer days. She was in bed, recovering from her operation for appendicitis. She was not allowed to get up yet, but Krinichny had rung up and said: "It won't kill you! People are waiting for you!"

She did go, and indeed people were waiting for her. Everyone knew how much trouble and effort the completion of the school had cost her, how hard it had been to get the funds, what a rotten work superintendent they'd been landed with, and how Professor Zhovtyak—chairman of a special committee set up by the town's Health Department—had suddenly called a halt to the project, belatedly seconding Krinichny's original disapproval, which had only then become known to him.

It was *her* forest school, everyone in the region knew it. Krinichny himself said to her at the opening ceremony: "We are expecting great things from you, Aglaya Petrovna, my dear. We do have tiffs occasionally, but opinion has it that you're a promising worker!" The "promising" was put in so she wouldn't get a swelled head.

And there, far in the North, in their cozy little house perched on the black rock high above the bay, which never remained the same colour for longer than a minute, Rodion was awaiting her, watching the telephone as he laid the table, worried that the plane was late, waiting for her, his wife. And she, too, looked forward to that moment when the launch would bump against the tarred logs of the pier, and Rodion, feeling shy in front of his sailors, would say with prim formality: "How d'you do, Aglaya Petrovna."

She looked forward to Volodya's letters—angrily cheerful and bashfully affectionate. She looked forward to his homecoming. She looked forward to holidays with Rodion on the Black Sea where they went to "roast their bones" as Rodion called it, and there, at the holiday home, she looked forward to the day when she would walk into her office again, hang up her raincoat, and say to her secretary: "I'll never manage! How can I ever wade through all this!"

At home, old Mefody, her father-in-law, awaited her. He was always grumbling: "Aglaya, child, your hot water's waiting for you!" "Your supper has long been waiting!" "They're waiting for you to call them back. . . ."

Rodion once said to her as he paced the stateroom on his ship in pleasurable meditation, drawing on his cigarette with relish: "I have a firm conviction, Aglaya, that every person should, to his last day on earth, wait for something that has never happened to him before, for something extraordinary and quite exclusive, in fact for the something for which he was born at all. Don't you agree?" And then: "Mark my words, that special day will come

for everyone! It must! It will be the final test, and a pretty stiff one, too!"

"Has the day come for me?"

The actual moment of transition from light to darkness was not frightening, of course. Poetry, music, and one's natural fear of death exaggerated that moment a great deal. To bear all that came just before the final stop was the difficult part. It would be the "pretty stiff test" Rodion had spoken about. It would not be easy to endure, to remain firm; to resist the force that would very soon, this very day, bear down on her with all its enormous weight, with all its calculated, expertly elaborated cunning, kindness, torture, sympathy, understanding, insults, food; starvation, heat, provocations, with everything that she already knew from people who had been through it, that now she was to experience herself. . . .

"She's whispering something all the time," the sergeant major said to the private with the narrow black moustache who was sitting next to him. "She whispers and whispers."

"I s'pose she's praying!" the private grinned.

"Bolsheviks don't pray." The sergeant major answered him gravely. "They have no god. We don't pray very often either, I'm sorry to say."

The private nodded vaguely. The sergeant major began to fill his short-stemmed pipe and his face grew melancholy. Aglaya noticed that he wore a wedding ring and also a signet ring on his little finger. How strange that this man with the beautiful hands and the grave, dignified face had only a few hours ago kicked her with calm, businesslike brutality, twisted her arms, and knocked one of her teeth out with those very rings. And then she heard him humming a tune and obviously delighting in the melody, and her flesh crawled. "Why, he's not an SA or an SS man," she thought. "No one could force him to hit me, and no one did force him. Does it mean that he is like that by nature and enjoys doing it?"

It was already growing dark when they drove into the town, or more correctly the carcass, or skeleton of the long-dead town. Being in charge of the evacuation at Vasilkovo Junction, she had no idea how badly her town, the town where she had lived practically all her life, was damaged, and it frightened and hurt her now to see the looming skeletons of gutted houses, the burnt down Prirechnaya Street, the pile of rubble which was all

that remained of the six-storey hotel, the town's pride, and the crippled bridge across the river. . .

The gates opened to let the lorry through, the privates jumped down and stamped their feet on the frozen ground to get warm, and then let Aglaya out. The caretaker, wearing a large apron, was sweeping the snow in front of the three-storey Gestapo headquarters, the large windows of which were ablaze with light—it was considered poor taste to black out. A smell of good, wholesome cooking came from somewhere; there were sounds of music; two athletic looking officers, wearing sweaters and mittens but no caps, were oiling their skis on the lamp-lit terrace.

"Stand here," the clerk told Aglaya.

She did. The clerk could hardly speak Russian. He entered her name and other particulars in a big, excellently bound ledger, then on a card, and again on a smaller card. Another man in a blue apron and matching sleeve guards took her fingerprints. A soldier-photographer was ready and waiting for her in the corner of the large empty room. He, too, knew his dozen Russian words needed for the job.

"Sit down."

And pushed a stool towards Aglaya with his foot.

She sat down. He then hung round her neck a board with the number R-709-3 on it.

"Don't move."

The camera clicked.

"Profile. Don't move."

"Stand up."

She walked away to the far end of the long, low-ceilinged and vaulted room. There was a bench there. Some soldiers were sweeping the place and talking among themselves quietly. All of them were SS men, picked nazis, and they talked as true sons of that thousand-year-old Reich should. They mentioned their triumphant armies "Süd" and "Zenter", praised someone called Zeitzler or something, but mainly Rommel of Africa and after him Ritter von Greim.

"And women, too. That's a must," the photographer suddenly broke into the conversation as he folded up his tripod and turned the key in his locker. "Well fed and well washed women, I mean women one might call geishas for our armies. Get what I mean, fellows? No hoggishness. Everything's got to be decent and home-like, with words of love and tender looks, they might play a tune on the concertina, let it be an imitation of love but let it be

neatly done. And we'd get some clever colonel to take charge of this auxiliary service corps, someone with a genius for running such outfits, some one, like, say, Hagenbeck in Hamburg with his world famous zoo. Animals in apparent freedom. . . ."

"I'm with you there," said a soldier with a small button of a nose. "You are perfectly right. . . ."

His small chubby face sweating from excitement he, too, began to hold forth on women in conquered countries. He did not want violence, he had an aversion for that sort of thing. Like the photographer he wanted German efficiency. He wanted good organisation, clarity of purpose, and sweep.

"After all, it's our right!" exclaimed a tall soldier with a beefy neck and bulging eyes in a sleekly fat face. "Ours and our brothers' on the fighting fronts. A woman decides a great deal in our life."

"A woman decides nothing, it's your life partner, in other words your wife, who decides everything," said an older soldier. "A woman gives you pleasure, a woman is undoubtedly a part of the army in the field, but it's the wife who decides. . . ."

Everyone laughed at him. And at his wife as well. They knew a thing or two about her, they knew how she decided matters at home in Danzig, and anything but in her husband's favour.

"Holy wedlock!" roared the soldiers. "Rupp had better pipe down about his happy marriage! And if it comes to that, what those mobile squads of lovely ladies are needed for is to cure the soldiers of homesickness: a soldier of the Reich should never think about his wife, he should live in the present and not in hopes of a furlough. Women! We know those brides till death do us part. . . ."

Completely ignoring Aglaya, they began to recount their various experiences with women, interrupting one another and bragging of their easy conquests in many countries of the world. Their obscene gestures and plain speaking left her unimpressed, but she was appalled and disgusted by the realisation that this was not simply the talk of dirty-minded men, hooligans or drunken scum but the voice of a system, a state. It was their idea of a bright future, their "moral code" speaking.

Their commander sat there, too, smoking a cigarette. Aglaya had turned her back on the men and now their black shadows moved on the whitewashed wall she was facing; the radio, somewhere not far away, was blaring forth one strident, spasmodic march after the other, and the thought was past bearing that

all this was taking place in Russia, under the Russian skies, that there were Russian fields and woods all round, and small towns she loved so dearly, and state farms, villages and collective farms where her work had often taken her and kept her for weeks, and that now—today, tomorrow or the day after, they would kill her because she could never submit to these dull-witted brutes in their tight green-grey tunics, just as the great country of which she was a tiny part could never submit to them. . . .

"Oh, what's the use," she sighed, and leaned against the wall to get a bit of rest while she had the chance.

It was a good chance because they had evidently forgotten about her for the moment. Utterly exhausted by the experiences of that horrible day she instantly fell fast asleep. In the meantime, developments followed the course prescribed in this establishment. Frau Miesel of the auxiliary service, who for some reason had been nicknamed Dog's Death by the Gestapo men themselves, put on two pairs of glasses and examined Aglaya's papers. A special portable device, which was extremely convenient for use even in field conditions, corroborated the authenticity of the passport found on the prisoner. The passport was, in fact, genuine and only the photo had been substituted, but since the device had not been "taught" to detect such expert substitutions, Frau Miesel swung round on her swivel chair and quickly typed out a statement to the effect that the passport was indeed authentic. And now, her enormous flat feet stepping softly in their felt slippers, she started along the wall of shelves on which the classified card index of Gestapo Group "C", in which Dog's Death had the honour to serve, was kept in proper order. Moving her big, loose-mouth silently, she pulled down from the second shelf a brown file marked "Active Members of the C.P.S.U., Region-Town (Women)", took out the green-grey linen envelopes it contained, marked "brunettes", "blondes", "fair-haired", and after some thought selected the one marked "brunettes". The photographs kept there had been taken from the local newspaper, *Unchansky Rabochy*, for the most part. They had been enlarged and touched up, needless to say.

The damp prints of Aglaya's photographs, taken at this place an hour ago, lay on a special lectern under a strong yet soft light. Still chewing her lips—a habit of hers when concentrating on a job—Frau Miesel quickly looked through the pictures in the "brunettes" envelope, and without much trouble picked out one showing a woman with wide-open, slightly slanting eyes, high

cheekbones, and a long braid worn in a crown on the top of her head. The photograph had a lengthy caption appended to it: "Aglaya Petrovna Ustimenko. Born March 1902 in Kamenka, a village in Unchansky Uyezd. Member of the C.P.S.U. since April 1918. Last office: director of Regional Public Education. Member of the Bureau of the Regional Party Committee. First husband a Cheka officer (dead), present husband Captain Rodion Stepanov (Navy). A. Ustimenko is popular, well-known, a dangerous organiser, never went against the so-called "general line" and has a clean record. Higher education, also special Party education. Present whereabouts, presumably the underground."

The photograph had a cipher "Gr. I".

This meant that the person was subject to secret extermination once he had been identified and had yielded information.

Popping a round green mint into her fathomless mouth, Dog's Death got back into her swivel chair, fastened the documents together by means of another special, portable device that both punched holes and slipped a string through, thus binding the papers automatically, tied the ends of the string in a bow, secured the knot with sealing wax, and stamped it with a seal bearing a swastika and the letter C. This done, she fixed her hair, which was the colour of last year's straw, and double-locking the door of the criminal archives, went down the passage to room six—the office of Sturmbahnführer Wenzlow, recently transferred here from Warsaw's notorious Gestapo in Szuch Avenue for some boyish prank. This Baltic German, a Volksdeutsch, was a real polyglot: he knew Polish, Russian and Ukrainian, spoke Czech like a Czech, Parisians took him for a native of Provence, and Britishers thought he hailed from Yorkshire. He was twenty-six when Himmler received him, and at twenty-eight he already possessed a "Gestapo within the Gestapo" card, which certified that he was Himmler's personal agent. Rumour had it that it was his lust for diamonds that had ruined his career in Warsaw, and that his special card had been taken away from him and no reasons given. What he had to do now was score the number of points required in this great gamble all over again. And this particular case would give him an opportunity to display his abilities to the full.

Frau Miesel, who had already fallen in love with Wenzlow, therefore wanted him and none other to handle this beautiful case.

"Yes!" Wenzlow shouted in answer to her knock.

She found the Standartenführer von Zanke himself holding forth in Wenzlow's office, and so, clutching her file, she stood just inside the door. Their conversation must have been going on for a long time: there was a stony look of sour boredom in Wenzlow's unkind eyes, though his white face expressed polite, indeed cordial attention.

"And the power of our German thought will be supported by Providence!" von Zanke continued bombastically, acknowledging Frau Miesel's greeting with a nod. "Providence will help our sober reason and our national character in its supreme mission. But on one condition. On condition. . . ."

"Yes?" Wenzlow prompted him readily.

"On condition that in our rear there is complete obedience, absolute dependability, and eternal quiet. Because the rear always means communications. Leading to what?"

"To what?" Wenzlow asked sweetly, although his chief's tutorial manner was beginning to irritate him.

"To achievements, my boy, to achievements!" exclaimed von Zanke. "We are only coming to the real achievements."

He smiled with his lips alone. "Have you been to India?"

"No."

"China?"

"No."

"Egypt?"

"No."

"You are going to broaden your knowledge of foreign languages. Our course, my boy, lies via the achieved conquest of the Bolshevik state to those immensely rich lands and farther. But even those great spaces are guarded by communism. One must understand: our hands are tied until we have finished with the Communists. Our dream will not be fully realised until we have converted the plains and forests of Russia into eternally obedient communications. The rest does not concern you and me. Someone competent to manage the agricultural pump of a region, a gifted Kreislandwirt, will ensure the nation's food supply. Raw material we shall also have in plenty. German women do not refuse to produce children, so we'll have our yearly reinforcement for the Army, Navy and Air Force regularly. It depends, of course, on how often our soldiers will be able to visit their wives. Your business and mine is communications, that's all."

Leaning on his stick, he turned sharply to Frau Miesel and, poking his bony finger at the file she was clutching to her lean side, asked: "What's that?"

She gave him a brief, accurate summary of the case. Frau Miesel spoke in a low, level voice, because the colonel could not stand people "putting pressure on him by bawling," as he put it. Intonations in human speech annoyed him as much.

"Justice has no need of music," he used to say, and no one knew what he meant.

"Let Wenzlow handle this," he said. "It's right up his street. Only remember to dig as deep as possible, my boy, yes, the deeper the better. It's never too late to hang someone, bear that in mind."

Leaning more heavily on his stick than his old and trifling wound necessitated, he walked out of the room. Wenzlow did not speak until the door had closed after him.

"Who asked you to bring me that stinking file which you have entitled a 'case'?" he demanded furiously through clenched teeth. "Why the devil must you meddle in things that are way above your head? You heard him—dig as deep as possible. In other words I'm expected to get information out of this damned Russian woman, and what will I get from someone with a background like hers? What, I ask you? More singing of the *Internationale* before the noose is tightened? Communications, indeed!"

He was shaking with rage. Frau Miesel and von Zanke's idiotic spoutings got mixed together in his mind. Aglaya Ustimenko! It was people like her who were in command of those "quiet, wordless, obedient" communications. And partisan war was only in its inception, too. . . .

"Get out!" He roared, no longer restraining himself. "And mind your own business! Criminology is what you were taught, and the rest we'll manage without you!"

Forcing a sweet smile, Dog's Death backed away and softly closed the door behind her. In the silence that followed, Wenzlow heard the roar of motors in the sky. They were bombers headed east. How many times a day he listened to this calm and measured, self-assured roar as they flew that way, and how many times he lighted a cigarette noting a change in rhythm, a certain confusion in the sound as they returned.

"Next one!" he told his orderly. "Who is it?"

"That Russian commy," said Obersturmführer Zollinger, clicking his heels, a good kid as the men in Group "C" called

him not without deference. "Herr Standartenführer has put the case down as yours. . . ."

He clicked his heels once more.

"All right. Give me ten minutes. I'm afraid I'm beginning to feel the strain, old chap. . . ."

Everyone in Group "C" licked Zollinger's boots a bit. The thing was that he held a special "Gestapo within the Gestapo" card, and so his friendship was sought by all. When he shot people he did it in cold blood—this cheerful, courteous "kid". He was a pet of the infamous Eichmann, expert in "Jewish affairs". Jews were also the "good kid's" business in Group "C". And holding investigations on the SS and SD troops was also within his competence. His recent catch was a certain Kaspar Krüger, a dreamy babbler, whom he volunteered to shoot himself, although until then they used to go hunting together and were known to be good friends. It was also Zollinger who shot the terrified lieutenant who had let Dr. Hummel get away; he went to Uncha on his motorcycle for the purpose, stood the collapsing lieutenant in front of the ranks, and "in the name of the Great German Reich" fired into his green, already dead face, said "Heil Hitler" and drove off—a jolly, tender son to his aged parents, a loving brother and a true nazi.

When Zollinger left the room, Wenzlow got an ampule out of his desk drawer, broke off the end and sucked out the caffeine. He found it a better stimulant than cigarettes. He then took off his black, Paris-made tunic, with the skull and cross-bones on the sleeve, oak leaves on the collar, and one soft shoulder-piece on the right shoulder. Feeling more relaxed in the soft, woolly sweater he wore underneath, he combed and smoothed down his hair. The caffeine had cleared his head, and his breathing was deeper now.

"I do have a lousy chin," he thought, glancing into his mirror. "A weak, receding chin. Even Dog's Death has a fine chin, to say nothing of the chief. There's something inferior in this softness. . . ."

Someone knocked.

"Come in!" shouted Wenzlow.

He was standing behind his desk when they brought her in.

"Sit down," he told her.

Aglaya sat down. Twitching his left eyebrow, Wenzlow peered into her face, her youthful chapped lips, her stern eyes, that were wide open yet closed to him behind an invisible armour. Faces

like hers deprived him of sleep and appetite, they made him doubt his own strength, his own superiority, his knowledge of the human soul.

"Communications, hell!" he said to himself angrily. The word was irritating him more and more. "The wordless plains of Russia! Why the devil did I have to learn the language!"

"You're Valentina Andreyevna Fyodorova?" he asked.

"I'm Valentina Andreyevna Fyodorova," Aglya repeated calmly, with not a shade of servility or eagerness.

"Is he a traitor?" she wondered, but she realised at once that he was a German, in spite of his rather good Russian pronunciation. There was something alien, parrotlike in his articulation: people don't speak their native tongue like that.

"So you're Fyodorova. Very good," said Wenzlow, and leaning back in his chair began to read a sheet of paper on which the letterhead was an eagle and a swastika.

Aglaya took the chance to study her interrogator.

His hair, the colour of ripe corn but already thinning out a little, was sleekly brushed back from a high, smooth, flat forehead. He had shiny blue eyes, thick eyelashes, thin and probably plucked eyebrows, a soft, slightly crooked mouth, and a sharply receding chin—such was the man with whom she had to fight for her life. On the wall hung a picture of Hitler holding a child in his arms. It was a full-length photograph of the Führer in cap, uniform and gleaming boots. A little dog lay at his feet. On another wall hung a portrait of Himmler. A green curtain draped the wall on her left.

"Oh well," he said after leafing through all the papers in the file. "Are you going to make a clean breast of it at once and thus lighten your unquestionable guilt, or are you going to lie senselessly and thereby put off the question of your liberation? How do you wish to conduct yourself?"

Aglaya made no answer.

"Do you smoke?"

"No."

"Do you want to eat or drink? Do you want to take a rest, to get a little sleep? Do you want to see a doctor? You didn't get hurt, I hope, when you jumped from the plane?"

"I didn't jump."

"Oh yes, you did," Wenzlow said with a weary sigh. "You did. Here's a photograph of you taken when you touched ground, and on this one you're still in the air. . . ."

He showed her two photographs, taking them from her file. They were fakes circulated by Himmler from Berlin in a number of variants. Aglaya thought it very funny, and smiled a little.

"You're a sensible woman," he said. "Need we beat about the bush? You do understand, I'm sure, that you've lost the case and resistance will not help matters any. If it's not today, it'll be tomorrow, if not tomorrow then the day after—so why should you and I make things harder for ourselves?"

"He's no fool," Aglaya thought calmly. "But there's obviously a mistake here. They're taking me for someone else. Maybe it's better for me that they should?"

Still, she said nothing and stared unwaveringly into the nazi's eyes. Her heart was beating evenly. How many times in the last six months had she tried to picture what these minutes would be like. And now they had come. Actually, there was just one thing they wanted her to tell them—the password to Chorny Yar, the question: "Would you barter a length of serge for a suckling pig?" And then. . . .

But it won't happen, Herr Investigator of the Gestapo, that's the whole point. And you'll never lay hands on that shipment of explosives that got stranded in Chorny Yar, and your trains will go on being derailed, the ammunition in those trains will go on exploding, the gasoline will go on bursting into flames, and in those buckled carriages, squashed like sardine tins, the maimed and mangled occupants will go on dying in their hundreds. . . .

"Would you barter a length of serge for a suckling pig?"

What a simple question, yet how impossible for them to find it out!

It's terribly simple, isn't it, Rodion? Isn't it, Volodya? But it can't be found out. And none of them will ever find it out!

"I'll play up the parachute jumping at first. It'll put her off her guard," Wenzlow decided. "And as if she really were a paratrooper, I'll tell her about our parachute landings, it stimulates the imagination. I wonder how much she knows about their forest activities?"

"Haven't you decided yet?" he asked politely.

"I've nothing to decide."

"Then I'll permit myself to show you a rather magnificent landscape," he said as he picked up a pointer, and walking to the draped wall, pulled the curtain aside and switched on a lamp

to reveal a huge map of Europe stuck with little swastika flags.

"How do you like it?" he asked.

She did not say anything, but he saw that she was impressed. As a matter of fact, Wenzlow had long been persuading his colleagues that psychological manoeuvres such as this hardly ever failed to affect people of some intelligence.

"The tread of history is always seen best on a map," he said with a cool smile. "However, I'd like to tell you something about our paratroops, as to an expert, so to speak. . . ."

And he proceeded to tell Aglaya in the tone of a lecturer, occasionally mixing up his Russian with other Slavic languages but quickly correcting himself not without elegance, what a real parachute landing force was, not one of those amateurish landings of a dozen or so parachutists (whose bravery we do not deny), but a real, first-class landing force like, say, the units of General Studet who took part in the Weserübung operation, or those landed on Corinth and Crete.

In a cold, hard voice he mentioned the number of J-88 and J-52 gliders they had. He told her about their enormous containers in which they delivered arms and ammunition, about their "human bombs" fitted with shock-absorbers; he explained how commando groups could be dropped for the execution of a given task and then, getting into their bomb again, be picked up by the plane and carried home to their dear, old, jolly and powerful German Reich.

Aglaya heard about the German fist, German might, German genius and German common sense. He also named armies, there were very many armies, divisions and corps, and also various special detachments, special groups, mobile groupings, and so on and so forth, but she was not particularly interested.

Hardly listening, she was preparing herself for the ordeal.

He couldn't be telling her all this without some reason. Something of great moment was coming, of course.

"You have no hope, no hope at all," Wenzlow said, wearily dropping his eyelids. "Are you going to talk?"

"No!" She said tensely. "I have nothing to tell."

"But maybe you will change your mind, Madame Aglaya Ustimenko?" he suggested in a quiet voice without emphasis. "Perhaps you'll tell me something? To begin with? A little."

"I don't understand," Aglaya said after a moment. "My name's Fyodorova, you know. . . ."

"Oh, you're Fyodorova, are you?" he laughed. "Oh no you're not, you're not Fyodorova."

"I am!"

"You're Ustimenko, a Communist. . . ."

"I am Fyodorova!"

"You're Ustimenko," he said, leaning forward slightly.

"No!"

They were both speaking very quickly now, question running into answer. It was like a horrible game: Ustimenko! Fyodorova! Ustimenko! Fyodorova!

"But I tell you my name is Fyodorova, Fyodorova, Fyodorova!"

He struck her across the face with his pointer, drawing blood. He brought the pointer down with the force of a whip striking her again and again across her face, over her head, shoulders and hands with which she tried to cover her face, until she managed to duck and jump to her feet. Her hand had barely closed over a heavy paperweight on the desk when she saw his gun pointed at her and heard his voice, that sounded hollow as though coming through a wall of water: "Put it down or I'll shoot you!"

The paperweight fell on the desk. She did not put it down, she dropped it because her bruised fingers were unable to hold it.

He must have damaged her hearing, because she hardly heard him now. He went on shouting, and she stood wiping the blood from her face with her palms and desperately trying not to fall down. Suddenly everything became perfectly quiet. In silence, two soldiers with identical heads of hair sat her down on a stool in the middle of the room, one of them forced her mouth open while the other one splashed in some liquid which she swallowed. Wenzlow paced the room from end to end. "Could I try to kill him?" thought Aglaya. Smoking a cigarette, he paced in unhurried strides, putting all his weight on his heels. "He's got to be killed." She thought again.

"Tell me about your underground!" he told her, standing behind her.

"No!" She spoke through bruised and bleeding lips. "There is no underground."

"Have you come from there?"

"No!"

"Who else was with you in the forest?"

She did not answer.

"Do you have an address? You were sent here to contact someone, weren't you?"

"No."

"Where did you have to report?"

She did not answer. What was the use? Why answer anything? And the sooner it was over, the better.

"If you answer my questions, it will be splendid for you," he now spoke in gentle tones. "I appreciate your feelings, you are a soldier and you have your duty. But I, too, am a soldier, and I, too, have my duty. In this case I am the conqueror and I cannot allow my soldiers to be destroyed by your partisans with my connivance, when everyone knows the legal regulations and statutes as regards guerilla warfare drawn up as long ago as 1907 by the Hague Conference. Don't you know them?"

Aglaya remained silent, wiping away blood and trying to pull herself together. He must have struck her with the paperweight as well as the pointer. There was a terrible pain in her shoulder, as though a bone were broken.

"According to the statutes of the convention," Wenzlow continued, "the resistance of the country's population or its troops to the enemy is permissible only until such time as the country has been occupied by the forces of the enemy, and under no circumstances after occupation. And so your guerilla warfare against us is a violation of international law."

"You don't say!" Aglaya marvelled. "Whoever'd have thought it!"

Wenzlow crushed his cigarette on the ashtray. The effect of the caffeine was passing, and he was feeling tired again.

"I wouldn't advise you to joke," he said.

"I'm not joking."

"And another small thing: all of you are outside the law also because international military law stipulates that partisans should abide by general laws of warfare. For instance, it makes it binding for your partisans to wear a distinctive uniform or insignia distinguishable from afar. The Hague Conference forbids you to conceal weapons. . . ."

He seemed to be saying all this quite seriously. And Aglaya, wiping the blood off her face, smiled. She could not think very clearly, but still it sounded very funny, as funny as the picture of Hitler with a child in his arms, as funny as the gentle expression on Himmler's face, as funny as the "righteous" indignation of this investigator in his yellow sweater.

"What? What's this? Why do you smile?" he demanded.

She did not answer him.

"All right. We'll have a break. I'm giving you time to think things over."

He went to the white washbasin and, standing with his back to her, rolled up his sleeves and began to scrub his hands with a surgeon's thoroughness.

A private with a submachine-gun hanging from a strap round his neck came in and stood behind her. She glanced at him over her shoulder and noticed that his ears stuck out from under his helmet and there was a stupid look in his hoggish little eyes. Wenzlow sprinkled some French lavender water on his hands, lit a cigarette, put on his black tunic with the skull and cross-bones, and thrusting out his receding chin stalked out of the room.

The private blew his nose loudly and sighed.

Aglaya sat listlessly, her arms hanging, her mind a tired blank.

"*Bedny, dobry Frau*," the private said in Russian. His, Wolfgang Puschmann's was a thankless job. He knew a few Russian "angleworm" phrases, and hoped that some day someone would swallow the bait and tell him all. These phrases were: poor girl, poor boy, poor kind Frau, poor old man, poor old lady, poor soldier. As yet, however, no one had got caught on his cheap little hook.

He sighed again, and thought dejectedly. "You've no luck, Wolfgang, my boy. The war will be over without you getting a lance-corporal's stripes!"

Ten minutes passed, then fifteen, then half an hour. Slowly the fog lifted from Aglaya's mind. She saw the room again, the desk resting on a vulture's claws, the gleaming metal desk lamp, and Hitler. On the desk under the glass she saw a large photograph of a long-legged boy, wearing brief pants held up by straps, playing in a sandbox. "His son," she thought. "Funny. What could he want with a son?"

That's All

"We have been interrogating you for more than fifty hours without a pause," Wenzlow said. "You should remember that human endurance has a limit. It would be stupid to die at your age for no good reason, simply because your heart suddenly failed. Don't you think so?"

The investigator's voice came to her from the velvety shadows. It was himself he was talking to in another world that was cool and not blinding. It had nothing to do with her. She was too busy fighting the light, this terrible, burning, glaring light that penetrated into one's every pore, dehydrating one's skin, bringing tears to one's eyes.

"Well?"

She did not answer. The investigators, taking turns, talked among themselves. She said not another word. The reflector of the electric heater placed on a stool in front of her was at least two feet in diameter. The red-hot coil was hissing softly and steadily. They called this operation: "Getting the taciturn lady nice and warm".

A jug of water stood at arm's reach. Take a drink, you're welcome to it. She did once—the water was bitter and salty. This was called: "Refreshments for the lady".

"As a matter of fact I'm sorry for you," Wenzlow said in a friendly tone, getting his cigarette going. "You're not yet forty, are you? Answer all our questions truthfully, help us as one of our own people, and we'll not only set you free, we'll even send you across to France, to beautiful Paris. You have read about it, I'm sure. You'll live an easy, beautiful, elegant life. You'll come there with a legend. Do you know what a well-contrived legend is? It is a series of acts arranged by the best minds of our institution, a systematised series of actions which in the final count determine the character of the given individual. We shall give you a chance to enter a certain set of people. You will enter it as a Russian, as a Red partisan, as a heroine who has escaped from our concentration camp. We shall put you in touch with the Resistance, it's exciting work. And when the world has been reorganised, we shall not be ungrateful for your services, understand, Ustimenko?"

"Bloody swine," Aglaya said almost inaudibly with parched lips.

"What did you say?" Wenzlow asked hopefully.

"Bloody swine," she repeated wearily.

He studied her delicate face which seemed to glow in the light of the heater, he looked at her high cheekbones, her slightly slanting eyes, her short dark hair sticking damply to her forehead.

This case was lost too.

Her name wasn't Fyodorova, of course. She was Ustimenko. But she would never admit it. And even if she did admit that

her name was Ustimenko, that was as far as it would go. He had not been here long but he knew it. He had studied the archives and he had a good nose for such things. The simplest thing to do was to hang her, of course, but that would not make the communications as blessedly peaceful and quiet as von Zanke, the old idiot, wanted. Day after day, month after month, practically going without sleep and rest, they had been struggling to bring some order into these communications. And still there was no order. They hanged and shot, tortured and burned, wiped out whole villages, they used flattery and feigned kindness, and then again they burned and tortured—and still no order. Whole regional committees of the Bolshevik Party were going underground in a body, and already the land they had conquered was becoming the field of battle. The distinction between rear and front ceased to exist not because there was such a thing as an air force, but because hand-to-hand fighting was liable to start in any spot of the conquered territory at any time, because there was no guarantee that a colonel-general, field marshal, gauleiter, or anyone of the best guarded, most treasured and important officials would not be killed in his office, his bedroom or his dining room this very minute, this very day. The concepts rear and front were all mixed up because trains bringing men and ammunition went hurtling down, bridges were blown up, gasoline drums at the airfields burst into flames for reasons unknown, sentries, officers and mistresses of military officials vanished, and the “earth burnt under their feet” as the communists worded it in their newspapers.

Tranquilised communications indeed!

The stillness of Russian plains!

The road to India and China, the road to Tibet. . . .

What damned idiots!

He switched on the desk lamp, opened the file on Aglaya Ustimenko, and taking his time, drawing thoughtfully on his cigarette, studied the memo Frau Miesel had drawn up that day, giving particulars of people who knew Aglaya Ustimenko well through work. In the main they were teachers and principals of secondary or technical schools, heads of regional departments of public education, inspectors and ordinary office workers like Averyanov who had long been waiting outside for a confrontation with his former boss—not that he knew what he was waiting for, of course.

His particulars read: Chief accountant. Dismissed on A. Ustimenko's orders for systematic drunkenness, coming to work drunk, and using foul language when scolding his subordinates. Extremely embittered. After making several appeals to higher Soviet bodies, had finally filed a suit in court which was rejected on the grounds that the court was satisfied with A. Ustimenko's explanation.

Mentally praising Dog's Death for her efficiency, Wenzlow pressed a button and told the orderly to bring him in. No names were mentioned in the Gestapo.

And here Wenzlow, for all his experience as investigator, for all his Gestapo training and mentality, made a terrible, unpardonable mistake. His own eyes having become accustomed to the pink-and-gold reflection of the heater, he failed to realise that to anyone coming in from outside the sight of that red-hot coil and its thousand reflections, that face shrivelled from the heat, and those parched, bleeding lips, the sight of that knife switch on the interrogator's desk, and, what was even worse, the nickel-plated chains with which the woman was secured to her chair, would immediately tell that this was no interrogation, it was torture, torture in its most cruel, calculated and pedantic form.

And that is what did happen, of course.

When Averyanov, an old man with a sallow, bloated face covered with a grey bristle, wearing a threadbare overcoat, girded with a girl's narrow leather belt, and a pair of tattered felt boots, stepped into the room, he shrank back in fear, unable to believe his glassy eyes, and flattened himself against the door frame, as if to squeeze himself into the wood.

With a low curse, Wenzlow switched off the heater, put on the ceiling lights, and thinking little of what he then believed to be a mere slip, turned to Averyanov.

"Mr. Averyanov, Stepan Naumovich?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," the accountant replied in a hollow, vodka-riddled voice. "You called me. . . . I got the summons. . . ."

He searched for it in his pockets.

As yet, recognition of Aglaya Ustimenko had not come to him: all he saw was the back of a woman's head, and a small red comb stuck into her short, wavy hair.

"That's the end," Aglaya thought calmly and dully. "That one will give me away. Why should he spare me? He'll give me away with pleasure, it'll actually make him happy. But what

does it matter now? They won't get anything out of me anyway...."

And feeling ashamed for this low-down drunkard because he would give her away, she closed her tired, bloodshot, painfully burning eyes so she would not have to see him do it.

"Come here!" Wenzlow ordered him. "No, no, not there. Over here!"

She heard the nasty shuffling of his felt boots as he moved past her chair, caught a whiff of the alcohol on his breath and the foul smell of dirty linen, but did not open her eyes, shrinking in immeasurable disgust at the thought of the imminent perfidy.

"Who is this woman?" Wenzlow demanded in a shrill, barking voice. "Answer me quickly, at once! You know her very well, Mr. Averyanov, tell me quickly."

"Her?" Averyanov said in a puzzled voice. "This woman here?"

"Have I changed so much that he can't recognise me? In just two days?" Aglaya thought.

"Open your eyes!" yelled Wenzlow. "None of your tricks now! Open your eyes!"

She looked into Averyanov's face. There was no fear in her eyes, only the revulsion one feels on seeing a rat that has been run over by a car. The old man stared at her closely as if trying his hardest to do what the Gestapo wanted him to do, and all at once Aglaya understood that he had recognised her and decided not to give her away. She saw a quick, human light flicker for a moment in his glassy eyes, which to her was like the life-saving flash of a beacon, and remembering his stubbornness from that long and difficult law suit of theirs, she knew he could be trusted to stand firm.

"Well? Have you recognised your dear chief, the charming Madame Ustimenko?" Wenzlow asked with calm confidence.

"No, I haven't," Averyanov replied gravely, working his toothless mouth in thought. "That one I know well, that bitch I'd know anywhere!" He shouted in a sudden rage. "That one plagued me so, I'll never forget her till the day I die! The bitch! If only this were she!" He said longingly, and the malice in his voice had a perfectly genuine ring. "I'd skin her alive with my own hands...."

"No, he hasn't recognised me," Aglaya decided. "Of course he hasn't."

"I've never seen this woman before," he said. "Never seen her."

"Yes you have, you've seen me lots of times, Stepan Naumovich," Aglaya spoke up suddenly to the greatest relief of Wenzlow who thought that she was at last ready to confess. "I used to hand in my accounts to you, the Nizhny Valtzy school accounts, you must remember me, I'm Fyodorova, Valentina Andreyevna Fyodorova. . . ."

She was taking a terrible risk, the stake was decisive and final. Her face was perhaps unrecognisable to him just now, but he could hardly have forgotten her voice. So let him make up his mind once and for all: if she was not Aglaya Ustimenko, she had to be Valentina Fyodorova. This had to be either confirmed or denied by the old drunkard Averyanov, a low-down character but one who was just then risking his life for his mortal foe.

"Fyodorova, you say?" he repeated, blinking in a baffled way. "There're lots of women of that name in our parts. Why, you can't be the Fyodorova who was always bringing me her quarterly accounts long after the deadline? Wait a minute, I know you now!" he cried eagerly and angrily. "There were two of you, the other one's name was Sonya Martemyanova, she was always making eyes at people, she and you both, you've landed me in no end of trouble with my missus. Sure I remember you now, I should say I do. . . ."

Wenzlow knew that he had made his second mistake. In his delight, worthy of a raw beginner in the Gestapo, he had allowed her to call herself Fyodorova, thereby forcing Averyanov to confirm the lie. But why was Averyanov coming to the rescue of this Communist, his former boss, this woman who had ruined his career? How was he to know that it would end so stupidly? It was, in fact, over, and he had no wish to hear any gossip about any Sonya Martemyanova, or anyone else.

"You may go," he said in a cool voice to conceal his irritation. "Go to Room 9 and fill in a form. Divulgence of what you have seen and heard in this room is punishable by hanging," he told him using the customary wording. "And now, get out."

"You wouldn't let me smoke here, would you?" the old man asked, peering furtively yet anxiously into Aglaya's face and rolling his eyes in order to communicate some secret message to

her. "Begging your pardon, of course, but I haven't had a smoke since Christmas, in a manner of speaking. . . ."

He stretched out his dirty hand towards the cigarette case lying open on the desk, but Wenzlow pushed it out of his reach and taking out one cigarette handed it to him.

The door closed behind Averyanov.

"You don't value my time at all," Wenzlow said to Aglaya with a sneer. "But I do. I know without a doubt now that you are Ustimenko, and, naturally, being a Communist and terrorist, a Red partisan, you will not want to talk to us the way we should like you to. And so you will have to die."

"Only a little earlier than you," she said with a clear look into his eyes. "You'll be shot too, you know, for what you are doing to innocent people. You will be shot, that's certain."

"You think so?" he asked with a half-smile. "But who'll do it, I wonder? Our death camps are so efficiently reducing to ashes all those who would resist us that very soon all will be peace and quiet. . . ."

She did not speak: she wanted to die without losing the peace of mind which, strangely, she had acquired when brought face to face with Averyanov. Why, if even this old man whom she had dismissed for drinking, who started a lawsuit against her in May 1941, and who had spread all sorts of lies about her in writing, if even he had not given her away, then dying was not so frightening after all. . . .

A burly red-haired orderly came in and clicked his heels. He was followed by two other privates in short tunics, one of whom was chewing quickly and swallowing something.

"Take her upstairs," Wenzlow gave the order in German.

Specht, the red-haired orderly, asked Wenzlow something she did not understand, nor did she care any more, she had to prepare herself morally for what was imminently approaching. She had to make herself ready. She wanted to think about the people dearest to her—about Rodion, from whom she had not heard since the outbreak of war, and of course about Volodya, who she knew had fought his way to Lbov's detachment. She also thought about Varya and about all those people with whom she had worked, argued, quarrelled and made up. She thought of Moscow and remembered, she did not know why, the sea gull on the curtain of the Art Theatre where she went with her sunburnt, handsome Rodion to see the last play in her life. . . .

"Take her away!" Wenzlow ordered.

She turned to look at him. He stood in the middle of the room, finishing a cigarette.

"They're leading you to your death, Madame," he said, smiling.

In order to kill her, the soldiers had to put on their greatcoats in the hall guarded by a helmeted sentry. One might think this was the front line. The greatcoats were to protect them from catching cold while they killed her.

Death!

They led her down a corridor that smelled of disinfectant, up two flights of stairs and outside through a door.

The wind was icy cold here.

And suddenly it dawned on her that she was on the sun porch of School No. 4. The sun porch had been her idea. From there one had such a splendid view of the lovely, broad, full-flowing Uncha, the water-meadows, the trim white houses standing amid lush greenery on the opposite bank, and the new bridge across the river. . . .

Yes, of course, the river, ice-bound now, was over there, in the darkness. Smiling happily, she remembered standing here with Rodion one windy Sunday in the spring, when there had been nothing but the framework as yet and it had frightened her to look down.

"The view is jolly good," he had said. "The wind blows here as strongly as out at sea!"

"So long as a thing is like 'out at sea' it's all right with you!" she had said, laughing.

She came to with a jolt: Specht's enormous hands descended on her shoulders and pushed her along in the dark. They came to some tall posts fitted with iron rings and broad leather dog collars, white with hoarfrost. Specht took her by the shoulder and stood her against one of the posts. The other men, deftly and quickly, secured the leather collars—round her throat, elbows, wrists, knees, and ankles—there were buckles and rings everywhere now, all threaded on one chain. Grunting with the effort, Specht turned the key in the lock which fastened the whole contraption.

"Fine!" He pronounced, and pulled Aglaya by the hand to make sure that she could reach the button sticking from the top of a low post close by.

The sun-porch door banged shut. She saw the black, frosty sky with a few, barely discernible stars. "There was something Rodion liked to say about stars. I'm sorry I never listened properly," she thought.

A chill shook her. She realised that this would not take too long. But she felt almost content, at any rate she felt calm, and so it angered her when the investigator suddenly appeared.

"There's a button close to your hand," he said in a pleasant, chatty voice. "Just press it if you want to talk to me. You'll pay dearly if you cheat. . . ."

She did not say anything.

"Did you understand what I said?"

She still said nothing.

"Do you think I enjoy doing this dirty job?" he said feeling sorry for himself, and shook her shoulder gently with a gloved hand. "But what can I do? If I tried to refuse d'you know what they'd do to me? Even old and highly honoured criminal investigators were done away with in our cellars in Prinz-Albertstrasse within the hour, if they so much as voiced a doubt of their personal suitability for political rather than criminal investigation work. A machine has been set going, an enormous machine with a giant mechanism, and there is no stopping it. And then stubbornness never helped anyone yet. Our life is so one and only, it's so inimitable, it's so perfectly unique, why give it up? In the name of heaven? But there's nothing there, you know. Absolutely nothing. Or do you believe in the hereafter, perhaps? Do you believe that you'll find happiness there? Up there where those wretched little stars are barely flickering?"

And then he recited with feeling, a tremor in his voice:

*Providence, oh Providence,
Give us strength and sustenance,
Teach us love and humbleness,
Teach us to forgive our foes,
Be with us for evermore. . . .*

"Is that what you want?" he asked.

"Leave me in peace," she begged quietly.

"In peace eternal," he chuckled. "Still, remember the button."

"Well, that's all," Aglaya said to herself. "It's all over now."

Where Is Varya?

Dear Aunt Aglaya,

I miss you. You'll say, of course, that it's not you I miss, and that I'm simply feeling homesick because I'm lying in hospital and doing nothing. Maybe you're right, but I'd love to see you just the same.

Why don't you write? You always preached that letters had to be answered.

Don't you remember me, Aunt Aglaya? You used to call me your Giraffe. Remember me? I'm your only, dearly beloved nephew, your Volodya.

It bores me stiff, this doing nothing. I haven't got the knack of it. It must be wonderful to be an idler and feel happy about it. You know, I envy people who know how to make the best of their leisure, who play draughts, dominoes, and finger the strings of a guitar with a pensive, melancholy and solemn expression on their faces.

Why didn't you teach me the art, auntie?

It was your duty to teach me how to do nothing and derive pleasure from it.

I've no news at all.

Oh yes, I have: I had an awful fight with Misha Shervud, remember him? We studied at the medical together. He's a slightly pop-eyed, sleek, respectable looking blond young man. As a student he was not without promise, but he was almost hysterically keen on getting his diploma. I remember how he used to get my goat, and not mine alone but also Ogurtsov's and Pych's. It was his impatience and his utterances about it being time to be through with our education, to do some summing up, to start practising. It's difficult to explain, but you're a clever girl, auntie, you'll understand: it always seemed to me that a desire to get a piece of paper, duly sealed and signed, was not the same as the desire to start doing your useful bit. Herten expressed it perfectly in roughly these words: "A diploma definitely hinders development, a diploma certifies, or even asserts, that the matter is done—in Latin, *consumatum est*." The bearer of the diploma has attained science, he knows it. Not bad, eh? Well, Misha Shervud is one of those who have "attained" science. Things like this always look suspicious to me,

but I know, of course, that you'll say I'm just getting carried away as usual. Never mind, we'll talk about it next time we meet.

Well, to cut a long story short, Dr. Shervud came to see me on visiting day, which, knowing him, I thought rather touching. He has a job in Moscow, he's staying with a soft, pink, complacent little piece he calls his cousin and is collecting material for his thesis. "Turpentine has its uses too," as Polunin liked to say, quoting Kuzma Prutkov.

I was allowed to get up and receive him in the sitting room, the one room serves all the three floors. To my mind, the years have put him and medicine far apart. Even talking about the simplest things made him nervous and he would try to change the subject as quickly as possible.

We naturally talked about the war, about fascism, and then about the Germans. At this point, my dear friend Misha Shervud, gazing at me with his calm, protruding eyes, delivered quite a speech on the question of Germany. This nice boy has come to the conclusion that the German people as such, the people mind you, should be wiped out for all the atrocities. Not just fascism, you see, but the people—women, children and the old-aged—"to teach them a lesson" as he put it.

I didn't quite understand what he was driving at. I wasn't listening properly because he speaks in a flowery style which I hate, and you know my habit of switching off my attention when I'm not interested. But then a flyer, Emelyanov, butted in. He's had his leg amputated, a very nice, modest chap. I knew from his voice that something was wrong. "The people? What have the people got to do with it?"

Shervud explained what the people had to do with it. By that time there were about ten of us sitting in the corner near the rubber plant. Misha's explanations were precise, intelligent and convincing, at least that's what he thought. Well, I saw red and yelled at him. I don't know what but I know I yelled, so furiously that he jumped up and backed away from me and bleated something about his sick nerves. The flyer, Emelyanov took a swing at him with his crutch. It was an ugly scene. If Rodion Mefodyevich knew he'd despise me for getting so hysterical, so don't write him about it—this letter is meant for you alone. Misha Shervud showed us his fangs were sharp, and he could bite rather viciously. He also has a head and not a turnip on his shoulders, as old Mefody used to say. He was quick to see

that he was facing a united front of people who had some, if only a little, war experience, and began prating about the everlasting good nature of Russians, a "criminal" trait under present circumstances, about "co-ordinated and purposeful" actions, about the harm done by too much talking and thinking in these tragic hours of war, unparalleled in history. It was then that I went for him. His demagogy made all of us squirm with embarrassment for him. Even so two chaps got the wind up a bit. Not because of his reasoning, but his manner of speaking, veiled hints and what Varya calls "unspoken lines", the threat in such of his phrases as "it's only a short step to pacifism" and "my sympathies, comrades, you've reached the limit in your talking" unnerved them. I really blew up then and started hitting at Shervud, figuratively speaking, with all my might, to the death. The two chaps who had shown vacillation returned to our ranks. And then I did a foolish thing, my darling auntie. I said that what amazed me most in our argument was the blood-thirstiness of this "rearmost" worker.

"Rearmost, did you say?" he grinned nastily. "Does this term apply to all our comrades who are not fighting at the front?"

I myself helped him in his demagogy. Now he plunged into battle—accusing and attacking, abusing and denouncing. People like Shervud love nothing better than someone else making a slip of the tongue or speaking their mind not very clearly. They never fail to profit by it, that's how they get on. Well I, naturally, let fly too. The tables were turned on Shervud in our argument: he now had to prove that we were preaching nonresistance to evil, that we would be a menace at the front, that it was only a short step from forgiving the people to forgiving fascism, and that we'd cause nothing but trouble.

And then, I believe I made another boner. On the spur of the moment I went and told him about a certain German medical officer I came across a short while ago. I also told him how and why the man died.

What a bit of luck it was for Shervud!

He even turned pink with delight. Of course, he made no reply to me. That would have been beneath his dignity. He turned to the other chaps, to our convalescing wounded, and addressed them in the righteously indignant tones of an accuser:

"You see, comrades? I trust it has been made clear to all of you where this so-called philosophy leads to? Do you understand now what Ustimenko is preaching? This is his philosophy in action! Medical Officer Ustimenko extols the nobleness of an enemy, he tells you of the man's pangs of conscience, he invites you to indulge in self-analysis and other highbrow nonsense instead of urging you to kill the Germans like the mad dogs they are. Ustimenko wants every one of you to stop to think before he shoots—supposing you kill another Hummel, supposing you wound a dear, kindhearted fascist, God forbid...."

"You lie, Shervud!" I yelled. "We are killing and we'll go on killing the invaders. We have fought, we are fighting and we'll go on fighting fascism until we have freed not just Europe but Germany as well from Hitler and this foulness with which he has corrupted generations of Germans. But the German people—that's a different matter...."

Oh auntie, how I yelled!

How I ranted and raved! Still, Shervud went away the conqueror. I was dying to kick him when he turned to leave, but I didn't do it.

"Is his name Shervud?" my friend, the flyer, asked. He's a philologist, by the way.

"Yes."

"Is he a descendant of the Shervud who betrayed the Decembrists and got rewarded with a tag to his name from Tsar Nicholas himself? Shervud the Loyal."

"I don't know."

"Shervud the Loyal was probably as careful," he added thoughtfully. And then he said: "You shouldn't have told the Hummel story. Shervud the Loyal was right. To hell with pondering on such things in wartime, anyway!"

See, auntie dear, what a mess I made of things.

Awful, isn't it?

Have you heard anything about Postnikov, Ganichev and my pal Ogurtsov? He got stuck somewhere and there's no news from him.

Does Rodion Mefodyevich write? And Grandfather Mefody?

Aunt dear, where is Varya?

If this letter reaches you, write back at once and tell me where that ginger person is. As you may easily guess I've no intention of starting a correspondence with her. I'd simply like

to know as a matter of curiosity where she's hanging out just now.

And please don't smile, all that is over for good.

I can just see you smiling.

Well, take care of yourself, aunt dear!

We'll live to see the very best yet.

Write to me here and tell me about yourself.

Oh, how I want to get out of here!

Your ever loving nephew,

Volodya.

Professor Zhovtyak's Misadventures

"Get out!" said the German surgeon. "Get out this minute! Understand?"

Zhovtyak didn't: he knew no German.

"You're being told to get out," Postnikov interpreted for him. "Do you hear?"

Zhovtyak went out into the corridor. Tears trickled down his cheeks. How was he to blame for this monstrous outbreak of typhus fever? Didn't he make representations, sending in one report after another, putting his request humbly at first and then quite boldly? Yes, yes, that last one had really been bold, and now he was paying for it. . . .

German hospital attendants whose protective clothing resembled divers' suits were dashing up and down the corridor, stripping the beds of their smelly mattresses, sheets and worn-out blankets and taking them out to burn. The wind blew in icy snow-weighted blasts. These damned Martians would make short work of the outbreak, of course. They wouldn't hesitate: they'd just burn everything, and that would be that.

Sniffing as piteously as he could, Zhovtyak stretched his hand out behind him so the nurse would help him into his coat. But even she had no pity to spare the old and honoured professor, and his tears were lost on her. She shoved his fur hat into his hands without looking at him.

A vicious January wind was chasing dry snow along what was now Adolf-Hitlerstrasse. The cold made breathing difficult. And suddenly he was afraid, terribly, hideously afraid. What would become of him now? He loved his monthly pay, whether in tsarist

rubles or German marks. Should he sell his collection? But who'd buy it? The Germans? Once they found out about his treasures they'd seize everything, they'd just take everything, without paying a broken penny. And what's more they'd kill him! They wouldn't think twice about killing him. They killed much bigger men—they killed them with matter-of-fact efficiency while chatting with one another—all of them feeling gay, all freshly shaved, all wearing highly polished boots, all of them with glossy, plastered down hair that shone as brightly with brilliantine as their boots did with boot polish.

He trudged homeward, sighing deeply, shuffling along in his mended felt boots, and keeping out of the Germans' way. Danmit, why did he have to live in that faraway Porechnaya Street? But he could not move now, he could not even contemplate it, with his porcelain, china and his pictures. . . .

The door of the casino, Sweet Bavaria, was flung wide open. The light from the street lamp, which creaked as it swung in the wind, fell on three German tankmen, snatching out of the darkness their black pink-edged shoulder pieces, their insignia—a sprawling silver eagle, their dark grey collar tabs, and their beefy, smug faces. Because the casino was below street level, the tankmen seemed to be crawling out of the ground like earthworms.

Zhovtyak slowed his step, for no one in this town knew what these drunken conquerors might do next, and anyway it was best not to come up against them.

A smell of food—rich onion soup and meat balls—came from the wide-open door of the brightly-lit casino. Zhovtyak sniffed it greedily. Ah, gone were the days when he, too, had good food like this. . . .

The three Germans, starting off arm in arm, began to sing an old song which was the craze now, with the idiotic words: "Wipe your tears away with sandpaper."

Putting on an obsequious, kindly smile, just to be on the safe side, Zhovtyak remained where he was until the three tankmen had turned the corner. He then entered a backyard, walked round the stinking garbage dump in which some children were digging, pulled open the door and stood blinking for some minutes on what was the head of the service staircase leading down to the kitchens and pantries of the Sweet Bavaria. There, in the depths of this underground kingdom of rich food, worked Valentina Andreyevna Stepanova. Madame Liss, the leading

dressmaker for the town's "chocolate girls", the name by which the sluts who slept with the Germans were customarily called, had got her her job of vegetable slicer.

After descending the stairs to the scullery where dirty dishes were being dumped with a clatter and nothing could be seen for steam, Zhovtyak paused for a minute before walking in. He polished his misted glasses and assuming the martyred look of a tortured but bravely stoic intellectual, shuffled his feet a bit, hunched his shoulders as far as they would go and addressed a full-bosomed waitress.

"I beg your pardon, but be kind to an old man, and call Valentina Andreyevna for me, will you please?"

The waitress shrugged her pretty shoulders angrily and ran away, but she did call Valentina. The once beautiful, animated face of this former parlour maid of the Gogolevs—this Alevtina who chose to be called Valentina—had become faded, there were dark rings under her eyes, the skin on her neck had become flabby, and altogether she looked worn out, almost beaten.

"Oh, it's you again," she said in a flat voice.

Zhovtyak kissed her chapped, blackened hand. He remained eloquently silent for a minute and tried to convey to her by look and bearing that he himself was finding this most painful, but what could he do. . . .

"I really don't know," Alevtina said pensively. "I simply don't know what I can do for you tonight. They're terribly strict now. They even post a sentry outside our service entrance later on at night. No one is allowed to enter. I wish you'd be more careful, you'll get me in trouble too, they kick people out for the smallest thing nowadays. . . ."

"That's what happened to me today," Zhovtyak said, puckering his lips. "But I'm bearing up," he said hurriedly. "I'm not complaining or anything, I obviously couldn't keep pace with the enormous energy displayed by the Reich command, I've done my energetic living. But the question of the menu, you know," he smacked his lips, imitating chewing, and looked piteously at her.

"Only you'll have to wait," she said, hardly listening. "And not in here, you'd best wait outside. . . ."

"Don't forget, now!" he said shaking his finger roguishly. "There must be a reward for the waiting, mustn't there, my dear lady?"

It was a long wait, and he was terribly sleepy.

He was worried too—what if his house had been robbed in his absence? But at long last he was rewarded. Alevtina called out. "Where are you?" and thrust a package at him. He kissed her hand with genuine emotion this time, and hurried off because of late she had developed the nasty habit of asking: "What's new?" with a meaningful inflection in her voice. He knew what she wanted to hear, what sort of news she was after, but he had no wish whatsoever to talk to her about such matters.

In the front garden of the bombed cathedral where a street lamp was burning, he looked inside the paper bag: there were three cooked beets, several raw potatoes, a couple of large onions, and almost a pound of meat, hacked crookedly off a larger piece in the haste of stealing. There was also a lump of white fat wrapped in a piece of paper.

"Look at that!" Zhovtyak said to himself. "The little lady's really smart!"

He sat down on a bench and ate the cooked beets there and then. A soldier was posting up a notice on the German command's "special" noticeboard. Zhovtyak sprang to his feet, muttered "pardon monsieur" into the German's enormous, square shoulders and, mouthing the words devoutly, began to read the new order. He understood little except the recurring phrase "will be shot" which appeared in all fascist orders; what impressed him was the signature at the bottom. It was so staggering that he could not believe his eyes. He stepped back, came closer and stepped back again. No, his eyes were not deceiving him. There in bold print was the signature "Military Commandant Major zu Stakkelberg und Waldeck."

"Und Waldeck!" Zhovtyak whispered as a prayer. "Zu Stakkelberg und Waldeck! Zu! Und!"

He sank onto the bench again. Immediately the picture of that long-ago night rose before his mind's eye in all its splendour: the wife of the captain in a flowing, perfumed, extravagant peignoir, the frightened young Galician wet-nurse, the tipsy captain with a monocle in his eye, the baby in the cradle with the pale blue satin drapes, the bouquet of lilac, and himself—smart in his borrowed uniform, which fitted him as though he had been poured into it, the vet instruments, and the violet eyes of the Baroness lighting up with joy.

"Yes, but zu Stakkelberg und Waldeck was her maiden name! It was her name, not his! He was plain Kletterer, Captain

Kletterer, and his first name was Otto." He recalled something else and the recollection filled him with sheer joy: "The young mother had then said: 'My child, my boy, my son, you will be heir to our name.' She had exclaimed. 'You will be Baron zu Stakkelberg und Waldeck!' That's what she had said and my remembering it will prove to the Major that I'm telling the truth. He will not dare disbelieve me when I remind him of this detail as well. He will not dare!"

Clutching the paper bag to his stomach, smiling and twitching his eyebrows, literally beside himself with joy, Zhovtyak hurried home. He slung his overcoat over a chair, instead of hanging it up neatly as he usually did, fastened the many intricate locks and bolts on the front door, rolled up his sleeves and fried the whole piece of meat at once. He ate his big dinner and drank a couple of glasses of vodka and only then did he begin to bark.

He had now been barking for many years and had become quite an expert in this somewhat narrow specialty.

Zhovtyak had always lived by himself. He believed that marriage was a harness, and only fools married and produced children who grew up to sponge on their parents, demanding this and demanding that, and if ever they did do any giving themselves it was only to very poor parents. Zhovtyak had no desire to be poor nor would he ever stand for anyone sponging on him. And so a sort of vicious circle was formed. If one married and produced no children, what was the point of getting into the harness at all? And so he had many lady friends in town who visited him occasionally, which was not very much to his liking because all women were notoriously curious. He preferred the rendezvous to take place in their homes. They all treated him with the respect due to a professor, pandered to his gastronomical and other tastes, and even if they did make scenes they were not too loud because the ladies had their husbands and families to consider and realised perfectly that there was no forcing Zhovtyak into marriage. He was a man of rich and varied experience, and knew how to retaliate with such regal disdain that one of his recalcitrant friends, a real lady and a gifted musician who taught at the conservatoire, actually fainted in the middle of the street when she heard of the reputation given her by Zhovtyak in his most emphatic and concise terms.

Before the war, he had a woman come in twice a week to clean his flat, starch his shirts and do a bit of cooking. She was

a priest's widow. Her name was Kapitolina Fedoseyevna but Zhovtyak shortened it to Kapa. A very fat, silent woman with powerful legs and enormous feet. It was the devoted Kapa who advised him to buy a good, ferocious dog to guard his collections (the extent of which she alone knew). Zhovtyak liked the idea and so Kapa got the dog for him, bringing the muzzled beast home on a chain. It did good service, barking loudly and fiercely enough whenever anyone came near the door of the flat.

Still, there was something unsatisfactory about the dog.

It lacked the frenzied ferocity, the huskiness, the foaming at the mouth, and the savage expression in blood-shot eyes, that would have put Zhovtyak's mind completely at ease about the safety of his treasures. And so, after studying a handbook on the subject, he proceeded to train his dog.

He was a hard taskmaster, so hard, in fact, that one day the poor dog turned on its bald-headed and perfumed master and bit him. After having had the required number of anti-rabies shots and spending a whole week in bed, Zhovtyak ordered the dog to be taken away and "put to sleep". He did not get himself another dog, but while training his first had himself learned to bark. He mastered the art to perfection now, even improving on his canine model's performance, growling savagely, snarling low and ominously and imitating a crescendo of barks with choking fury.

Whenever an unexpected visitor called on Zhovtyak he put on a show. At first he would bark ferociously and throw his body violently against the door. Then, having dragged the imaginary dog away with loud cuffing, he would pretend to lock it up in some distant room. He would wait awhile and then hospitably fling open the front door.

"That idiot of a dog," he never failed to say to the caller. "Pounced on a funny chap who called the other day, actually tore at his throat! The ferocity of the beast is amazing!"

Even during the hour or two he sometimes managed to spend at home in the middle of the day, Zhovtyak took the trouble to stage his barking and howling act, telling his neighbours afterwards that Zeus, as the imaginary dog was called, was so terribly lonely without him.

But then the neighbours became curious: how did the dog manage without "walks"? Without batting an eye, the professor explained that his dog used the toilet like anyone else

and even flushed it afterwards by pulling the chain with its teeth.

"Can we come and see?" begged the neighbours' children.

"I shouldn't advise you to," Zhovtyak said with the smile of a kind old man. "It may cost you your life. You can't take liberties with my Zeus, you know."

Once or twice a month, in the dead of night mostly, Zhovtyak barked for his Zeus out in the street as a warning to everyone.

And he certainly had "the what to guard" as they say in Odessa. From the first days of the Revolution he had been collecting paintings, porcelain and china, putting his heart and soul into this hobby, or rather the substitute he had for a heart and a soul—his tireless, irrepressible energy which had been directed entirely towards the attainment of his fascinating and only goal.

In those days of the Revolution, troubled and confusing for Zhovtyak, when his father's hardware store, Zhovtyak and Son, in faraway Voronezh was razed, when the sugar refinery his father had just got going was closed down and all the real estate owned by the old merchant family was nationalised, Gennady Tarasovich said good-bye to his papa, who was just recovering from a stroke and wheezing horribly, and then good-bye to his mama, a slight, cowed, mousy little woman. He told her to forget him, and departed, destination unknown. . . .

He appeared in Porechnaya Street as a front-line feldsher who hated Kerensky and this fratricidal war. He addressed meetings, and was considered a powerful speaker even though he had some extravagant notions, such as demanding extreme measures too frequently and with too little grounds. Nevertheless, the public health department, which was just being set up, gave him a post of importance in which he proved himself a man of energy, erring somewhat on the side of his too keen sense of "class feeling".

The high position he held did not, however, prevent him from developing a thriving private practice at his flat in Porechnaya Street. Here he treated piles by injecting them with raw spirits. In spite of the pain they suffered, many of the patients advertised Zhovtyak and his method far and wide. This was the beginning of the no small fortune he eventually amassed. Here, also, he incised the peasants' troublesome carbuncles and furuncles; sweating profusely and swearing, he set dislocated bones, pulled out teeth, and most important, "helped people

out" at a rewarding price with medicines that were in short supply at the time. And all this he did to satisfy his one passion!

The peasants naturally paid him in kind with flour, geese, corned beef, lard, butter. . . .

When he had collected a sufficient quantity of foodstuff, and provided himself with a set of most impressive documents (his job at the gubernia health department was, in fact, to make out documents), Zhovtyak, purple-faced from carrying his heavy bags, boarded an army transport train, introduced himself to the men as a professor at the academy, cut open a boil or two or, perhaps, pulled out a couple of teeth, told them the smuttiest jokes, reviled the bourgeoisie, the international counter-revolutionaries, the whites and other scum unmercifully and treated the more mistrustful-looking Red Army men to a glass of homebrew. In this manner the professor, a man "after their own heart" and the "real thing", got to hungry Petrograd, where he had certain connections in different parts of the city. Once there, he armed himself with a magnifying glass and proceeded to examine the trade marks and designs on cups, saucers, figurines and bric-a-brac. The "counter-revolutionaries and the bourgeois" could not wait to get a decent meal. Zhovtyak was not hungry, he could afford to take his time and besides he had no competitors in this business. He was the one and only buyer. The "counter-revolutionaries" called him the "curio" among themselves, but not without respect. A week or two later he returned home with a packing case pasted all over with printed labels bearing the legend: "Laboratory Equipment, Roppf Bros." He had all the permits and passes he wanted, because he made them out himself.

He also looked up people in Moscow and made the rounds of the neighbourhood, visiting the old country seats of the nobility, the "Turgenev places" he called them. There he examined the pictures on the walls, pored over the contents of china cabinets made in the days of serfdom, sighed together with the old ladies and the old gentlemen in sentimental regret, and bled them white, as he admitted to himself. His superiors thought he was making the rounds of the neighbourhood to personally inspect the local health department set-ups. But Zhovtyak did not overwork himself with any supervising. And anyway what health service was there in those years? It was mostly confined to lofty dreams, circular letters and signatures with a flourish. . . .

And thus the basis of his collections was formed.

It was in that same period that feldsher Zhovtyak, who was always speechifying and denouncing someone somewhere, confided to the very people he was denouncing and those who expected him to "pounce" upon them, his cherished, modest and really touching wish to study. "I'm only half-educated," he said, dropping his eyes demurely. "I've had plenty of practice, I have some experience, but in theory I'm only a feldsher."

The hint struck home. His hearers became quite flustered in their haste to please. The local professorate chose to render this natural talent every assistance. The "natural talent" should be given his due; he studied really hard, he wanted knowledge. And he was pertinacious enough, besides. Before long he began to "correct" his teachers "so they wouldn't think they were God Almighty", and sternly used expressions like "dialectics", "it's sheer empiricism, if I may say so", "Marx taught us". The professors squirmed and quaked. . . .

Occasionally he invited the teachers to his place, fed them rich food, deliberately used bad language, and told them tall stories about himself. One was about the time when he was a revolutionary commissar, vested with power, and did not know how to spell the word execute when writing his resolutions: "All to be *excuted*" or "All to be *exccuted*". The teachers looked at each other with eyes blank with fear. And Zhovtyak went on, laughing merrily: "It's so funny to remember. I wouldn't make a mistake in my resolution now. . . ."

In those days the future Professor Zhovtyak kept his collections in the cellar. It was yet too early for them to see the light of day.

He made no attempt to join the Party for very, very strong reasons of his own: the first being that on the spur of the moment he had overshot the mark in the biography he had submitted, and candidates, as everyone knew, and people generally who wanted to join the Party were checked and double checked. There were certain individuals working in the health service who always jeered at Zhovtyak quite frankly and even had the audacity to speak against him openly—individuals such as the late Polunin and his less bold but venomous enough crony Professor Ganichev, who was unfortunately still hale and hearty. He had other enemies besides, among the students too, nullities like Volodya Ustimenko, for instance.

This was the first and main reason why Zhovtyak made no attempt to join the ranks of the Communists.

The second reason was his ample and highly remunerative private practice.

He had no intention of contenting himself with his doctor's degree. A plain-spoken "one of themselves" with the common people; a thinking doctor, optimistic and dedicated, with the intellectuals; an irreverently easygoing boon companion with the NEPmen; a sensitive lover of music and other fine arts with the bored small-town ladies who longed wistfully for big city life; an efficient doctor in a belted tunic and high boots when attending the families of Party officials—this monster of impersonation rose so fast first in the gubernia and then in the region, that sometimes he actually felt afraid and decelerated.

But things were moving by inertia now. In his position he could not remain a plain physician, and so, in no time at all, he got his Candidate of Science degree by presenting a thesis with a long and complicated title in which he proposed a new method of treating wounds with an assortment of ointments and balsams, made up according to his own invented prescription. For his Doctor's degree, he further developed his first theme and presented it with a certain amount of self-criticism and some cleverly flattering acknowledgements to those who might prove dangerous. It went off very smoothly, and one fine day Gennady Tarasovich Zhovtyak became a professor, "vaulted into professorship" as Prov Polunin, his well-known ill-wisher and enemy, put it at the time.

He had early begun to cultivate the manners and appearance of a famous specialist, and the image had been moulded so meticulously that long before the event, or "the stinking scandal" to quote Polunin once again, all his patients had been calling him "professor".

The scented fringe of hair surrounding his scented pink bald pate, the goatee, the rings (he was a connoisseur of jewelry as well as of porcelain and china), the benevolent snile, the fits of anger, feigned as if to protect the patient from the hard-heartedness of the hospital nurses, the angelic patience with the wives, mothers-in-law and other female relatives of the powers that be, the ability to make a useful person fabulously comfortable in his clinic at the expense of persons who were of no use to him, and the very manner in which he so regally entered the clinic with his retinue—all these things helped to make the already popular Dr. Zhovtyak a famous professor.

Well then, the Party would have certainly deprived Zhovtyak of a chance to continue reaping his abundant harvest from the field he had so carefully cultivated and sowed. And the yield, it goes without saying, was abundant.

In his feldsher years he shirked no job that would give him dexterity, he had a great deal of experience in surgery when he was younger, and so those of the operations that required only ordinary skill he was now able to perform with a certain amount of brilliance and elegance. But if, heaven forbid, the case proved to be one where the surgeon was required to correctly assess the variants of the complicated anatomical deviations in the course of the operation, Zhovtyak became flustered and frightened, and turned imploring eyes on Ivan Dmitriyevich Postnikov, upon whom he had come to rely and who operated in his stead more and more often now. Zhovtyak's avarice grew with the years. He took fees from patients who wanted to enter his clinic, warning them that the operation would be performed by Postnikov under his, Zhovtyak's, guidance. The patient having been put to sleep neither knew nor cared who cut open his belly or under whose guidance it was done, but as a result, because of the glum Postnikov's superlative skill, Zhovtyak's fame grew. He pocketed the whole fee "so people shouldn't gossip".

When the war broke out, he immediately began to make feverish preparations for departure, more concerned with the evacuation of his treasures than himself. And then he realised that he could not possibly take the fortune he had amassed over the years with him, unless he revealed the secret he had guarded so well. In two days of hopeless brooding over the problem he lost flesh and colour. The tale he told the local authorities was that Moscow had telephoned him to say that he was not to go with the institute but was to await further instructions. And in due course he complained to Moscow that the institute had "left him behind". After listening carefully to a dozen or so communiques announcing the progress made by the German armies, he gave up his feverish preparations, stopped packing, and ordered Postnikov to do likewise.

"What do you mean?" Postnikov asked him indignantly.

"What I say. Or do you want me to remind you of a certain fact in your record?"

"What fact? What are you talking about?" Postnikov asked, turning pale but still looking straight into Zhovtyak's eyes.

"You know well enough what *ignoble* fact I mean."

"But you yourself! You yourself advised me to..." Postnikov gasped.

"You'll have to prove it first, my good man," Zhovtyak said with a benignant smile. "And in these sorrowful days who'll want to bother with a tiresome investigation? Because of that fact you won't be taken into the army; you will be taken somewhere else, where the bit of sky you'll see will appear checked, or, in jail-birds' language you'll be where I can see you but you can't see me. And what with all those strong measures that are now being enforced, you're quite likely to be shot too, so don't stick your neck out. . . ."

Postnikov went away, his spirit crushed. And Zhovtyak, after doing his barking routine, sprawled comfortably on the couch and abandoned himself to daydreaming. He was a Russian professor. He was not a Party member. He was well known. His speeches and public addresses would be forgiven him. As soon as the Reich armies entered the town he would give the appropriate authorities the names of all the unreliable characters who remained and thus win favour with the German command. And then he would open a private clinic. It would be his clinic, the private clinic of Professor Zhovtyak. He'd be damned if he performed any more operations and took the risk they involved! All the operations would be performed by Postnikov on whom he'd turn the screws once again; this time for his activities in the Red Army during the Civil War, for his pro-Soviet sentiments, and any number of other things! To keep him there was the main thing, and building up a case against him was child's play! And so he would not have to part with his collection, he would not have to worry, all he had to do was bide his time and in the meantime keep out of people's sight.

The thing to do was to fall ill.

He lay gravely ill for a long time, now getting a little better, now taking to bed again with an acute attack of renal colic. Being a doctor he knew exactly how to feign the symptoms. But people had seen him about in those last days of evacuation, so he got the priest's widow, who was eagerly awaiting the Germans, to spread a rumour that he had been killed by a direct hit during one of the air raids. His dog, however, went on howling and barking in the flat which the priest's widow looked after. Zhovtyak meanwhile entrenched himself in the basement where he now kept his collections, and busily studied a

Russian-German phrase book while the Germans shelled the town.

The day the fascists entered the town, Professor Zhovtyak had a good scrub and shave, donned a light-grey suit and a freshly starched shirt, put in his briefcase a still warm loaf of bread the widow had just baked, a silver salt cellar and a silver dish, and via backstreets and alleyways hurried to the Grand Hotel in Lenin Street where, he thought, the German command's headquarters were bound to be.

But a bomb had hit the Grand Hotel, and the building no longer existed.

There was still firing in the streets.

Helmeted grey-green figures on motorcycles, mounted with machine-guns, made Professor Zhovtyak sprawl flat in the dust two or three times. It was already late afternoon when the professor—utterly exhausted, his clothes torn, his throat parched and his face burned by the merciless sun—at long last saw the motorised infantry appear.

At the head of the column came a small car in which sat a lean, lanky officer. With the dull look of a terribly tired man who was accustomed to such sights, he glanced at the smoke-blackened, smouldering houses with their gutted entrails, surveying what had once been a big, noisy town. . . .

Zhovtyak brushed his suit with the palm of his hand, straightened his hat, placed the slightly squashed loaf of bread on the dish, stuck the salt cellar into the centre of the loaf and carrying the dish before him went and stood at the crossing.

The men in the small car shouted a warning to him. There was a burst of machine-gun fire. He squatted, his hat rolling away down the cobblestone street, but still they did not run over him. The exceedingly polite young man who was in the car with Oberleutnant Dietz said something to him hastily, whereupon soldiers picked up Zhovtyak and handed him his hat. . . .

Apparently this particular unit had never been given a bread-and-salt welcome before although it had traversed all the distance from Berlin to Uncha, and Dietz simply did not know what it meant. A newsreel cameraman suddenly materialised from nowhere. And there was another one, on a motorcycle. Pens got busy, cameras clicked away. A picture of Professor Zhovtyak with his precious loaf had to appear in the German press that same day. But since they did not think Zhovtyak

made a decent enough show all by himself, they ordered the soldiers to take off their helmets and form a vague sort of shifting background behind the professor's back.

Oberleutnant Dietz was bored and sleepy, but the cameramen wanted the whole thing repeated all over again. Their imagination running away with them, they made Dietz shake Zhovtyak's hand for the third time, after which Zhovtyak was to clutch his head in his hands as if to say: "The horrors we suffered before you came, Herr Oberleutnant!"

At last they were through.

The motorised unit went on its way, and Zhovtyak remained at the crossing alone.

Immediately, a burst of submachine-gun fire came from the ruins of the former State Bank building. The bullets, screaming, struck the cobblestones. Why, they were firing at him, they were firing to kill him, to destroy him! He was now a traitor, he had betrayed his Motherland. . . .

And then he fell on his belly and crawled.

There was not a wound, not even a scratch on him, but he moaned. He fancied they were watching him from those broken windows which reflected the red, setting sun. He fancied that dozens, no, hundreds of cold, calm eyes watched him as he crawled across the cobblestones. And he fancied that he was already dead.

Still, he crawled on: whoever had fired at him must have run out of ammunition. When Zhovtyak reached home, he took a hot bath, and for the first time in all those years he did not laugh at the priests's widow for saying her nightly prayers in the corner of the kitchen.

Early next morning he went out.

He found neither Oberleutnant Dietz, nor his polite interpreter, nor the cameramen. The motorised unit had moved on, to the south. In the former building of the regional and city Party committees, there were a lot of totally strange Germans hurrying hither and thither. He tried to tell them that he was a professor, that he wanted to co-operate, that he could set up a clinic right away, that he was devoted heart and soul to the "new order"—but for all that they kicked him out. And it was not until the end of September that he succeeded at last in getting the job of chief physician in a small hospital which the Germans supplied with neither medicines, provisions nor bed-clothes. While Postnikov operated, Zhovtyak sat in his office,

shivering from cold and fear. He now regarded his bread-and-salt welcome as the height of imbecility. Then came the outbreak of typhus fever in the hospital. And for that Zhovtyak had been thrown out to die a hungry death after years of dedicated, sleepless toil—these were his thoughts, as he prepared the speech he would address the next morning to the military commandant of the town, Major zu Stakkelberg und Waldeck.

"The truth will out," he talked it over with himself as he laboriously digested the pound of meat he had bolted. "Even if it does take time. If this zu proves to be the zu I hope he is, then I'll have a good life yet. If he doesn't. . . ."

Oh well, he had taken plenty of risks in his life, he'd take one more: he'd write to Hitler, or if it came to that, to Rosenberg. He'd tell them about the terrible ostracism to which the people of this town had subjected him. He'd tell them about his utter loneliness. He'd tell them about his faith in the supreme order which the all-conquering German armics brought with them, and he'd set out his views on the need to apply the strictest measures to those who, even if silently, opposed the new order. . . .

With these thoughts he fell asleep.

He dreamed that he was a chairman. Chairman of what and why his dream did not say. But anyway he was sitting at the head of a long table and rudely shutting up the speakers. What joy to be able to shut people up. There were tears of sheer happiness pouring down his face when the alarm clock woke him up at two in the morning, warning him it was time to bark. . . .



Chapter 5

Schneller, Judas!

Major Bernhard zu Stakkelberg und Waldeck got up to shake hands with Professor Zhovtyak. What is more, he held out both hands. And what is even more: he said to him in rather confident Russian, looking him up and down with his violet-coloured eyes:

"I'm glad to see you here, old chap. Ah yes, yes, it's all as you've said. The story about those vet instruments with which you brought such comfort to my dear late mutterchen still amuses the friends of our house . . . how do you say it? Of our family, yes that's it. Why don't you sit down? Have a cigar. Would you like a glass of some excellent armagnac?"

Zhovtyak blinked away his tears: his troubles were over. He had bet on the right horse.

"Baron," his voice trailed off in a question.

"I'm a plain major here, Herr Professor," Zu Stakkelberg und Waldeck held up his hands, palms upward, in protest. "I'm the military commandant of this pile of ruins. But it flatters me that you remember that, too."

They sipped the French Armagnac. The commandant smoked a cigar. His long, rosy and very young face was freshly shaved and powdered. The wintry sun poured in through the frost-encrusted windowpanes. Piece by piece Zhovtyak began to identify the furniture in the room: the desk came from the office of the Regional Executive Committee's chairman, and both the leather armchairs, he believed, belonged to the dean of the Sechenov Institute, the Persian rug was Ganichev's without a doubt, and this sofa once stood in the regional Party Committee and the late first secretary used it for an hour's sleep when work kept him there all night. . . .

While he gazed about him, the commandant perused the papers Zhovtyak had handed him in a leather briefcase with a tooled oriental design. The papers had been selected "nicely and cleverly" as Zhovtyak liked to say. Less public activity and more academic stuff. Two documents certified that he was the co-author of two inventions—actually, he had done no more than let the authors use his title. They also proved that he had "push". The commandant studied these with particular attention.

"I congratulate you, Herr Professor," he said, twitching his eyebrow to let the monocle fall into his open hand, and showing a row of even, white teeth. "We shall make from you . . . or how do you say it . . . of you? We shall make of you an unique, an excellent, yes, a most excellent Bürgermeister. . . ."

Zhovtyak's mouth fell open from amazement and fright.

"In your letter addressed to me, Herr Professor, you expressed a statement, or how d'you say it? You stated a desire to cooperate. . . ."

"Oh yes, I'd do all in my power. . . ."

"Splendid! That's it—you will do all in your power! The great. . . No, no, it's not enough—the greatest! The famous Professor Zhovtyak!" He burst out laughing, and pressed a button. "You must forgive me, but I myself can't do it! Our propaganda can. They know how to do it, they know how to give a person publicity, as the Americans say. Today we appoint you

Bürgermeister, tomorrow all Berlin will hear of you, and the day after tomorrow—the whole of Europe!”

The aide was told to bring in Dr. Krolle. Dr. Krolle came in and clicked his heels in front of Zhovtyak. The next to appear was a broad-beamed interpreter in golf pants, and suddenly there was a pretty, dimpled stenographer from the auxiliary service standing beside Major zu Stakkelberg und Waldeck. A moment later the order was signed and sent to the printing room, and after that all those present clicked their heels and looking straight into each other's eyes drank to the Bürgermeister, Professor Herr Dr. Zhovtyak. Then the major, assuming a stony expression, threw his arm upward and a little forward and cried: “Heil Hitler!”

And Zhovtyak, in spite of himself also goggled stupidly, threw out his arm and shouted together with the others: “Heil!”

“And all was in a whirl,” as Zhovtyak remembered reading in some funny book. Klieg lights were switched on, movie cameras began to hum gently, the major with the violet-coloured eyes took Zhovtyak's arm and advanced on the war correspondents with gliding, resilient strides. The major's aide helped Zhovtyak into his overcoat, lined with polecat and trimmed with little tails. A private handed him his beaver hat politely. The klieg lights were switched off, the non-commissioned cameraman gave an order to his men; walking backwards and talking to one another in a gobble, they took a picture of Zhovtyak standing beside the Mercedes-Benz, another one of the professor getting in, and a third one of the car moving off....

“Where are we going?” Zhovtyak asked, sprawling on the leather seat.

“To the hospital,” the interpreter sitting beside the chauffeur said in an insolently off-hand manner without turning his head. “You're to perform an operation for the news. You'll be operating on a child, saving its life. D'you know how?”

“Yes, but what hospital are we going to?”

“The chauffeur knows. He has his instructions.”

Dr. Krolle did not bother to explain either. A siren wailed, and the cameramen overtook them. The Mercedes-Benz took the bumps smoothly, rocking the passengers gently. Sweat broke out on Zhovtyak's brow from the strain of trying to guess where they were taking him. To the former regional hospital? But it was in ruins! To the children's clinic? Or to their own hospital?

"Schneller!" yelled the non-commissioned cameraman, or whoever he was, when Zhovtyak, panting and puffing, got out of the car, "Schneller! Schneller!"

"Get a move on!" snapped the interpreter. "The cameramen are busy people, you mustn't hold them up, so look sharp."

"Schnell! Schnell! Schnell!" the privates of the newsreel squad hustled Zhovtyak into the building.

They only let him get his breath back when they got to the interns' room. And now Zhovtyak knew where he was: this was the Professor Polunin Second City Hospital. He himself, with deep emotion had addressed the solemn meeting held here in memory of the deceased Polunin. "How really strange are the ways of fate," he thought, wiping the sweat off his bald head with a handkerchief. "Amazing, really!"

The private of the camera squad who looked like a young rat peered thoughtfully into Zhovtyak's face, and then twitching his streaky ratlike whiskers, painted the professor's mouth with a dark lipstick, smeared his face with some colourless oily stuff and sprinkled it with powder, treating his face in the same way a mother treats her baby's buttocks. And in the meantime, a nurse, sick from fright, was helping Zhovtyak into his white coat...

"You're supposed to be thinking!" the interpreter stood behind him and translated the instructions. "You're preparing for the operation. It's a very complicated operation. The plan is maturing in your head. Eurcka! You've found the solution!"

On went the klieg lights again.

"But I've got to know who the patient is!" Zhovtyak cried. "His case history, at least. . . ."

They gave him the case history. It said: "Georgi Matskevich. Age 11. Diagnosis: . . ."

"You're thinking and smoking," continued the interpreter. "Here, hold the packet so the brand can come out clearly. The Bürgermeister-professor smokes an expensive brand, it's important."

And Zhovtyak was repeating the name to himself: "Georgi Matskevich, Georgi Matskevich. . . ."

The cameras began to purr and hum again, the non-commissioned cameraman turned Zhovtyak's face to the left with fingers that were as cold as a corpse's. He rapped out his orders in German.

"You are looking at the Führer," rattled on the interpreter. "The Führer will give you strength and courage for the noble

deed you are about to perform. The solution comes to you after you've looked at the Führer. And now—Eureka!"

"Eureka!" cried Zhovtyak and slapped his forehead.

"No good!" said the interpreter. "It was very unnatural. Start all over again. Don't slap your forehead, scholars don't. And don't forget to smoke!"

Georgi Matskevich lay on the operating table wearing make-up. The events of this extraordinary day had made Zhovtyak so dizzy that he hardly recognised the doctors he knew so well. The boy, his mouth half-open, stared at the purring movie cameras, the yelling soldiers and the sweating, made-up Zhovtyak with frightened, tortured eyes. The non-commissioned cameraman would not let Zhovtyak scrub up. "There'll be no operation," he said. "It would take too long and it wouldn't be good theatre. Schneller! The professor-Bürgermeister gives the child a chocolate, pats his head, and that's all."

"That will be all!" Zhovtyak thought gratefully. "Thank God for that."

But the obstinate Georgi would not smile gratefully at the professor. All that came was a tortured grimace. And then the boss of the cameramen, making lightning changes in the scenario, ordered the doctors and nurses to smile instead. They did not make a good job of it either, and then Zhovtyak heard something that sent a chill down his spine.

"Just think how funny the Bürgermeister will look when they hang him. That'll make you smile right away." A voice said softly behind him. "Won't it be a jolly sight!"

Caution told him not to turn round. He remembered who the voice belonged to much later, when they were on their way back to town. He recorded the name of the speaker in his retentive memory: Ogurtsov, a bosom friend of that same Vladimir Ustimenko who had always been such a thorn in his flesh. Never mind, Ogurtsov, our paths will cross again. . . .

He remembered Ogurtsov's face too, the freckles, the pug nose and the teeth with the spaces between.

The camera squad photographed Zhovtyak again when he was inducted into his "honourable" office. The commandant's order appointing Zhovtyak was laid on the desk of the city administration's chief accountant. The beaming staff congratulated one another on the appointment of the new Bürgermeister and went back to their places with happy smiles. Then began a procession led by Dr. Krolle arm in arm with Zhovtyak, with the in-

terpreter squeezing himself in between them, followed by the head clerk, who had been chosen because his clothes were better than the others' and because he wore a necktie. Also, he smiled well.

"Schnell! Schnell!" the non-commissioned cameraman yelled again.

The staff sprang to their feet. Zhovtyak, as required by the scenario, wished them good morning and said it was a fine day. Then with a fatherly smile he invited the mother of the boy he had just "operated on with such success" into his room. The part of the mother, photographed from behind, was played by the typist, Sylva Genike, who claimed to be "slightly" German. Zhovtyak patted her shoulder and told her that the child was out of the woods.

"Alles!" yelled the supreme commander of the camera squad. "Ende!"

The cameras stopped their purring.

"Cigarettes," said the interpreter holding out his hand to Zhovtyak.

"What cigarettes?" Zhovtyak did not understand.

"Where are those cigarettes? The shooting is over. Hand them back," said the interpreter.

The camera squad left. The interpreter told the professor to clean himself up. Sylva Genike brought some lukewarm water in a chipped bowl. Zhovtyak was too exhausted to do more than mop his face with a wet towel, but he was given no chance to rest because now Dr. Krolle led him away to meet the staff. (This was not for the movies, it was in earnest, the interpreter explained.) The staff sprang to their feet again, but there were no smiles now, only frightened glances at Krolle.

"Ladies and Gentlemen," began the interpreter. "Herr Krolle wishes to inform you that Professor Zhovtyak, appointed Bürgermeister as from today, will tolerate no complacency, his stand will be firm and inexorable. Herr Zhovtyak is an old resident. He knows everyone here. And he will notify the Reich command if he suspects you not only of disloyal action, but of disloyal thought, for thought precedes action. . . ."

Zhovtyak watched Dr. Krolle out of the corner of his eye: the man's round little face with the small nose and pink mouth suddenly turned purple. The words which Zhovtyak could not understand sounded like punches and slaps, the staff stood with drooping heads, not looking at one another. "I'm done for," Zhovtyak

thought miserably. "I'm finished now." Afterwards, in the Bürgermeister's overheated office, the broad-beamed interpreter, standing beside the imitation-bronze bust of the Führer, made it clear to Zhovtyak that the local staff had to be watched, and that they were investigating certain matters at this very moment, to be exact—the disappearance of some highly important forms, such as passes. The investigation was naturally a secret one, but should the need arise, the Herr Professor should get in touch with Herr Wenzlow, who knew Russian, by this telephone (he showed exactly which one) using the password "München". The Herr Professor was advised to keep an especially keen eye on the hunchbacked accountant employed at the city administration; Zemskov by name. They had him on the hook already, but orders were to find out everything about him before he was liquidated, because he undoubtedly had ties. . . . When informing against people the Herr Professor was to. . . .

"I beg your pardon, but the word 'informing' in this case, . . ." Zhovtyak protested.

"When informing against people," the interpreter went on completely disregarding Zhovtyak's protest, "the Herr Professor must first make sure that the door is locked."

Dr. Krolle, warming his pink palms in front of the stove, turned sharply and barked out some orders that again sounded like slaps. The interpreter's speech became hurried, a frightened expression appeared in his eyes; in the next few minutes Zhovtyak heard that the Bürgermeister before him had not left town at all but had been shot in his own flat, that he, too, would certainly be the object of the "forest bandits' big game hunt", and that hereafter in all things, he was expected to "display courage, strength of character, and sobermindedness in conformity with the requirements of the great northern shrewdness which is an essential component of the all-conquering German spirit". He also learnt that he was not entitled to a German bodyguard, but if he so desired he was free to form a police guard for himself from among the local residents; he learnt that his monthly pay would be so many occupation marks, that he would get his food supplies, not on the same terms as a Reich serviceman but only from the warehouses of the Kreislandwirt "surpluses", but that his bodyguard, if any, had the right to confiscate foodstuffs from the population for the Bürgermeister's and their own consumption, provided, however, that sixty per cent of the confiscated

products went into the above-mentioned warehouses of the Kreislandwirt.

Zhovtyak was in a daze from the Armaniac taken at that unusual hour, the posing for the movie cameras, the heavy cigar smoke, Krolle's penetrating shouts and the smooth rapid, aggressive speech of the interpreter. He had a sickly feeling in the pit of his stomach and wanted to go out into the fresh air. This whole enterprise of his now appeared to him as a horrible trap from which there was no escape. Krolle and the interpreter were no longer there, and now the new Bürgermeister had to receive his undernourished staff, who all streamed into the office with papers that wanted signing, with questions and problems which he was afraid to put off but which, on the other hand, he was unable to solve because so far he completely failed to grasp the scope and scale of his forthcoming activity.

One paper, typed in Russian, he studied for a very long time. He was supposed to sign it, but he had a creepy feeling that as soon as he did something awful would happen to him. His secretary—an elderly man with plastered-down hair and the sullen expression of a many-times convicted criminal, sighed and coughed with great tact into his beefy fist.

"Go on and sign it, Mr. Bürgermeister," he said. "They're going to bomb the village."

"What do you mean?" Zhovtyak was really mystified.

"They want to practise a new method of bombing, they call it nocturnal or something. They've marked off the whole of this Velikonizhye Village on their maps. If the people don't leave, I mean the wretches who're there, they'll bomb it just the same. And in this paper here, you as a professor of medicine are asking them nicely. . . ."

Zhovtyak felt a chill in the region of his heart. He read the paper through once again. The door was open into the waiting room, somebody there was softly singing an old chain-gang song in a nasty, flat tenor.

*We sat there on the yellow bench,
My trim new friend and I.
The chap was a policeman,
And that's the reason why!*

"You mean as a sort of preventive measure?" Zhovtyak asked.

"Take it any way you damn well please," the thug answered rudely. "You ought to know, you're the professor, not me. . . ."

Zhovtyak put down his signature and blotted it with a dirty piece of blotting paper. The thought of being left in the room alone frightened him.

"Now, I'm a medical man, and you—what is your . . . main occupation?" he asked politely, just to keep the man there.

The thug turned a steely look on Zhovtyak.

"We're twisters, Mr. Professor. Sectarians is the official name for us. And I am the mentor."

"Oh, I see," Zhovtyak nodded his bald head. "Oh well, I'm very glad to meet you. I'm sure we'll get on."

The same dreary voice began to sing again:

*Malania went to buy some oil
And almost died from fright:
Nasty Pcte, her mood to spoil,
Yelled with all his might. . . .*

"Proskuryatinov, cut it out!" the twister-secretary shouted into the other room. "This is no tent show!"

"Who is he?" Zhovtyak asked.

"He's our chief clerk. He's not a bad chap, only he's a bit cracked. He's a transmigrator of souls."

"In what sense?" Zhovtyak had another shock of fear.

"From a mouse into a stone, from a stone into a tree, from a tree into a sheep. All is mortal and all is eternal!" the sectarian quoted with a stony stare. "That's Proskuryatinov's creed. You can take it or leave it."

Zhovtyak nodded rapidly, anxious to put an end to the conversation. The creepy horror of it! It was like a nightmare. But the man's quiet voice went on and on.

"There's that accountant of ours, too, Zemskov his name is. He sells home-brewed beer. He's a wizard, no other word for it. It's a light beer, crystal clear, and it tastes like nectar. Would you like me to get you some sausage, pork sausage in melted fat with a bit of garlic? Here, I've made out a warrant, just sign it. . . ."

Having signed the search and confiscation warrant, Zhovtyak waded through the pile of papers on his desk. He read all the orders issued that month, marking off the points that struck him as important with a red pencil, jotted some things down in his notebook, and then glanced at the clock. It was two o'clock. Smoking his cigar, or rather the butt of one, he flung open the door and asked if there was anyone in the waiting room to see him.

The clock in the waiting room struck two. "I'm getting as pedantic as a German!" he said to himself.

The first to come in was a handsome man, past middle age, who looked like an actor and had a mouthful of gold teeth. Bowing and smiling and bowing again, he congratulated the Herr Bürgermeister on the appointment and then reminded him that they had already met before—he was the director of the local cemetery.

"Yes, yes, I believe we have," Zhovtyak uttered with regal vagueness.

"There's no believing it or not, it's a fact," the director assured him, bowing and smiling like a mechanical doll. "The number of professors you laid to rest through me, and the way you used to swear at me. 'Filipov,' you would say, 'you're a rogue and a swindler,' you would say, 'the very sight of you makes me sick. You're a crook,' you would say, 'you'll even cheat a dead man out of his last pair of pants.' And really, Mr. Bürgermeister, there's such a demand for burial space just now, that even for a person like you I'd. . . ."

"Never mind that," Zhovtyak, the superstitious, waved his hands to silence him. "I don't like this sort of thing. And I don't remember you at all. Please state your business, I've people waiting. . . ."

The former cemetery director moved his lips, hid his gold teeth deep inside himself somewhere, and said that he wished to have all burials at the Bogodukhovo cemetery arranged through him and carried out by his own workers' artel. As undertaker he would prepare the graves, provide the hearse, the priest, the coffin, and everything else, to those "who so desire".

"The Germans, you see, are having some organisational difficulties in this matter," he told Zhovtyak in confidence. "Their troops get their coffins, for instance, from Germany. Of a standard type, they are."

"Oh well, we have no objections," Zhovtyak said, stroking his bald head with an air of importance. "You'll have our support. Of course, it's a big undertaking you are planning, and you'll need funds."

"I'm not asking for a subsidy," the man said dropping his eyes.

"You've saved up enough?"

"I suppose you could put it that way."

Zhovtyak took the man's application, thought a moment, and then wrote his resolution on it, giving his sanction and blessing

to the enterprise, using pre-revolutionary orthography or what he remembered of it. The former cemetery director, and now the sole owner of Last Journey Undertakers, read the Bürgermeister's resolution, and began bowing, smiling and bowing again as though he had just been wound up anew. Zhovtyak's expression became sad and expectant. He realised, of course, that he was taking a risk and a very big one, but having taken the major risk he saw no sense in getting frightened over trifles. He wanted a token of gratitude, that's all. Surely it must be obvious to the Germans themselves that one couldn't live on their occupation marks?

"Well, that's that," he said with a shallow sigh.

Still bowing and smiling, the newly established undertaker turned away, got out his wallet and, after counting the notes carefully, handed the Bürgermeister his fee.

"What's that?" he asked sternly.

"A donation," the undertaker answered briskly. "Towards the needy. Please accept it from me."

"Very well," Zhovtyak nodded. "And now I must say good-day."

After the undertaker's business, he had to go into the matter of rat poisons, next he issued a patent for the production of erzats tobacco called Bayadere, after that he showed the door—actually shoving and cursing savagely—to Pevsner, the old Jewish chemist he knew very well, for coming to plead for the release of his mother-in-law. He then ordered his sectarian-secretary to wrap up the confiscated pork sausage for him, endorsed another five or six applications, approving or rejecting them as the fancy took him, locked up his seal and rubber stamp with the stock of residential permits and passes for which he was answerable, and went out into the frosty street with the firm stride of a big official.

Feeling and looking important in his beaver hat with the velvet top à la boyar and his polecat-lined coat with the beaver collar, he crossed the street at a leisurely step and started towards Sweet Bavaria, through the backdoor of which he had been wont to slip for a handout like the lowest of beggars.

He was one of the masters now!

And again, as in those old, old days at the Grand Hotel, he would let the deferentially bowing doorman help him out of his overcoat, while he dropped a few dignified and cheerful remarks about the nasty cold, and then, rubbing his hands, his

feet sinking in the thick carpet, would walk into the brilliantly lighted restaurant, nodding to friends and looking for the nicest table. After all, measured according to old standards, he was the mayor of this town, at the very least. . . .

And quite forgetting that moment of panic when he said to himself: "I'm done for! I'm finished now!" the Bürgermeister quickened his step, actually feeling younger from his delectable thoughts and the anticipation of a first-class, beautifully served dinner and excellent service. He went down the few steps and pushed open the plate glass door.

It was all exactly the way he had dreamed it would be.

A string orchestra was playing softly at the far end of the brilliantly lighted restaurant. The place smelt of first-class food, and a little of Germans—their officers' eau de Cologne and cigars. The doorman, resplendent in his gold-braided uniform and his huge beard, rushed forward to Zhovtyak who, rubbing his hands, as planned, began to slip out of his overcoat.

The doorman said quickly and spitefully: "Get out of here! Only the officers of the Reich are allowed in, understand? Get going. . . ."

"Just a minute!" said Zhovtyak, pushing the doorman away gently yet imperiously. "I'm the Bürgermeister, and so naturally. . . ."

Just then a German soldier appeared on the scene. He heard out Zhovtyak very politely, told him to wait, and went away through the velvet-curtained door. Zhovtyak stood there sweating, his overcoat part way off, his beaver hat in his hands. The German did not come back for a long, long time.

"Not allowed," his tone was still very polite. "Get out! This instant! Schnell!"

Zhovtyak tried to give his face an ironical expression, but without success. Struggling into the sleeves of his overcoat, he dropped his hat on the floor. The soldier glanced at the hat in silence, but did not pick it up. Nor did the doorman.

"I'll report you in any case," Zhovtyak said to the doorman. "And you won't get off easily!"

"Go ahead," the man said softly. "Go ahead, Zhovtyak! Mister Bürgermeister! Judas!" And he spat neatly into the cuspidor.

The Resurrection and Death of Averyanov

When he was filling in the printed form in Room 9 of Group "C" on Herr Wenzlow's orders, Stepan Naumovich Averyanov's mind was already made up: he would break his promise to the Gestapo that very day at any cost. The wording about the penalty being death did not worry him in the slightest. His almost forgotten, deliciously exciting fury was mounting in him again more powerfully than ever: this time he'd make that bitch Aglaya eat her words that he was an "outsider" in the system of public education. Just let this war be over, just let them drive the bloody fascists out of here, and he'd sue her at once. He'd claim compensation. He'd watch the hateful Aglaya wiggle when she got what was coming to her, when she'd been hauled over the coals because of Averyanov, the "hooligan and drunkard" as that young legal adviser who represented the Regional Public Education Department, had had the nerve to call him.

"Why, she even closed her eyes!" he said to himself again as he showed the Gestapo sentry his permit to leave the premises. "She couldn't even bear to look at me, I'm so low. But if I didn't obey their orders it's because I have my own principles, and it doesn't mean that I—a Russian named Averyanov—am a traitor! All right, I missed work on May 4, 1941, but I had a doctor's certificate to say that I had acute food-poisoning. Does it follow that I should have been dismissed on no other grounds than what I correctly qualified in my complaint as her 'opinionated cussedness'? And just because the court decided wrong these fascist bastards think they've got me hooked? They think Averyanov is a traitor? Oh no, gentlemen, no, I'll wait for my own Soviet court, and then they'll see how adamant I can be. Let comrade Ustimenko grovel at my feet, I'll squeeze my compensation out of her even if this war goes on for another ten years. And then I'll go on a good, long binge, until I collapse with the most acute alcohol poisoning. That's how it's going to be. You'll know what I'm like then, you'll know there's no worse temper than mine. And I'll only drop into your precious Public Education Department to hand in my resignation."

Out in the street, in the cruel icy wind, he had an immediate craving for vodka, just one little glass to "cool down his nervous system". He was in more than dire need of a drink just then, but he could think of no one who would give him one, and went home, promising himself a drink later when he was carrying out

the plan he had worked out while filling in the form with the words about the death penalty in Room No. 9.

His wife was not back yet. The Germans had mobilised her to unload logs that day, and she was probably still at it. Averyanov's son looked down sternly on his father from a portrait on the wall; the boy was in civilian clothes but his father knew that he was no civilian. He was serving his people as a man of his age should do at a time like this.

"Yes, Kolya my boy," the father said to the son's picture. "Yes, son, I too have been to a certain place today. But never mind, we've still got what it takes. . . ."

Having shed his shoes and clothes, the old accountant shaved with his very blunt razor, and rubbed the last of his wife's cold cream into his face, forgetting how highly she prized it in the belief that it helped to "stretch one's wrinkled skin". After that he got his suitcase out of a hiding place behind the kitchen, and put on his best, dark blue suit which he had not worn since that court session. Freshly shaven, his grey hair brushed with "artistic" carelessness, and wearing a bow tie, he rather liked his looks and his slight resemblance to that old actor Makaveisky who mostly played highly strung natures, and who had long ago appeared on the local stage in the roles of Prince Myshkin, Tsar Paul and then some foreign madman.

"She closed her eyes, just think of it!" he said to his son again. "She's so sure about everything, you see! She knows everything so well! She's the daughter of working people, you see, that's why she can read everyone's mind like a book. And you and I, you see, must be the descendants of Duke Sumarokov-Elston, Prince San-Donato, and also Stürmer himself. . . ."

Having, with some difficulty tied the laces of his old boots, he reached into the drawer where his handkerchiefs were always kept, and suddenly his fingers touched a bottle. A shiver ran lightly and quickly down his spine and he groped no further—he wanted to put off the moment of disappointment.

"Even if it is the most expensive eau de Cologne I'll drink it anyway," he told himself firmly with a defiant frown.

But the vodka "midget" bottle contained something better than eau de Cologne. It was full to the brim with his wife's home-made lotion, famous for "efficiently opening and cleaning the pores" as it said in that thick notebook in which, in prewar days, she put down all the new cooking recipes she came across—vitamin salads, minute cookies, cheese straws, and useful hints

about taking out various spots. This lotion was made with grated horse-raddish, and as he sniffed the transparent liquid Averyanov suddenly recalled that hot afternoon before the war when, pouring tears, he had grated a huge stick of it for his wife. "I had already begun going to seed then," he said to himself using his nagging wife's words not without malicious pleasure, taking a drink out of the bottle and sniffing a crust of German stale-proof bread. "It was already after the court decision."

When he was done with the lotion, he hid the empty bottle out of mischief's way, and wrote his wife a note in his strong, clear, bookkeeper's writing.

"Margot darling! I've a lot to do tonight. Do cook something for a change, it's a bad habit of yours not to make soup. You're not being thrifty. Stepan Averyanov."

Feeling strong, chipper and even young, he got into his very decent overcoat, wound a muffler round his neck, put on his badly moth-eaten astrakhan cap, pushing it back and tilting it at a slight angle, and left the house. For the first time in months of idleness, litigation and squabbling, he felt busy and useful, a man who had no time to waste. He felt light-hearted too, for the first time since the day he lost his case against the Regional Department of Public Education. The sort of "job" he planned to do that night appealed to him enormously. He even felt like singing, and hummed under his breath:

*Holding high their war-torn banners
Red with fallen heroes' blood,
Came the bold Amur guerillas
Like a river in full flood.*

Two Germans, with their hob-nailed boots thudding on the frozen cobblestones, came round the corner and stopped to listen in amazement—was the man crazy? But he took no notice of them whatsoever, he was a very busy man, he had things to do. He was in a hurry because he wanted to manage everything that night and not put it off till tomorrow or after tomorrow as many others, whom Aglaya trusted so implicitly and gave such glowing references to, would have done. She had kicked him out, but here he was risking his life for her while everyone else would simply have gone to sleep and many were in bed already.

He stopped at the street corner remembering that they might be following him, the way they did in the motion pictures and books about revolutionaries and the Bolshevik underground.

Standing in the icy wind, which blew viciously at the crossroads, he looked about him alertly, wiped his running nose with a glove, and then, breaking into a song again, continued on his way.

*They will shine in fabled glory
Like a beacon in the dusk,
Volochayeusk's fighting mornings
And the stormy nights of Spassk.*

Used as he was to his old, battered felt boots, the leather shoes did not feel very comfortable. He was a little tired, too. The whole day had been rather nerve-racking, but still his mood was cheerful and militant. What's more he was honestly beginning to believe that he was not simply carrying out a decision of his own, but was acting on orders: he had an assignment, it involved plenty of risk and was most difficult, and it was entrusted to him personally.

"And why not?" he talked to himself in a half-whisper. "I'll do it, don't worry. Listen to those Germans—laughing, are they? If they only knew where and why this citizen is going, if they only knew! But the fools will never know, that's the joke of it. No, gentlemen from the thousand-year Reich, you'll never know! Nor can you know or guess, my highly esteemed Tatyana Yefimovna, who is on his way to see you at this moment and what sort of conversation you're going to have. . . ."

Averyanov had not seen Tatyana Yefimovna Okayomova, headmistress of School No. 6 for quite some time, and all he remembered was the dour, condemning expression on her lean, bony face. "It's not going to be easy," he thought. "But I'll frighten her into it. I don't care how, but I will frighten her into it, she's not a brave sort. That's how I'll do it."

"Who is it?" she asked, without opening the door.

"An old, old friend of yours. Remember Stepan Naumovich Averyanov?" he asked unctuously.

"It's rather late," Okayomova said, making no pretence at geniality, though she did open the door and let him in.

Her manner was not exactly hospitable, but polite enough. She held an oil lamp while he took off his coat, and even enquired after his health. However, she did not offer him a seat, but this could have been because there were old newspapers and rags spread over everything in her small room, with lots of roasted and peeled acorns on them which Tatyana Yefimovna and a

big-nosed, dusty sort of old woman had been sorting out and packing in paper bags.

"What's this? Mrs. Okayomova's coffee-packing firm, or what?" Averyanov asked, rubbing his frozen hands. "Is it for piggies or humans you're doing it? Someone told me that at one time you did a brisk trade in reels of thread or something at the market?"

Tatyana Yefimovna glanced at Averyanov with calm dislike and made no reply. The dusty old woman went on rustling behind her.

"You ought to be glad," he told her. "After all, I'm alive and kicking, didn't become a hopeless drunkard and die in a gutter, as all of you predicted. . . ."

"Why should you die in a gutter just now?" Tatyana Yefimovna said suavely, though her tone held all kind of implications. "This is the very time for you to prosper. I expect you're going uphill, aren't you?"

Averyanov blinked, holding back the words that were on the tip of his tongue: "You dirty old bitch! So you also think I'm no good! Never mind, Mrs. Okayomova, we'll see how tough you are when I tell you why I have come! It won't be the same thing as penning those complaints about me for coming drunk to work or refusing to accept your accounts for purely bureaucratic reasons! Not the same thing as seconding the almighty Aglaya that time you all went for me in a body, getting me so confused that I really did make a poor show. It won't be the same thing at all!"

Naturally, he did not say any of this. Sighing and, looking as mysterious as he could, he whispered: "I've got to talk to you alone, without witnesses. I don't want anyone to hear us, it's a very dangerous business. . . ."

"What dangerous business?" she asked with a quiver in her voice. "You really surprise me. . . ."

"There's nothing surprising about anything in these times," he said in a hollow, mysterious whisper. "But I'm not going to waste my time on you. It's up to you whether we have that talk, or I just make a note of it."

"I have no secrets from anyone," Okayomova, her fear evidently mastered, said sharply. "I've nothing to hide from anyone."

"But I have. I have a secret, understand?" Averyanov said, trying to imitate the tone of voice of Wenzlow, the Gestapo officer. "And hurry up, I've no time."

"Let's go into the hall then," Okayomova said, turning slightly pale. "There's nowhere else."

Holding the oil lamp, she closed the door behind her, and then Averyanov delivered the short speech he had composed early that morning in Room No. 9.

"The Gestapo have arrested a woman who looks like Aglaya Petrovna Ustimenko. This woman's name is Fyodorova, remember her, she was a teacher, a friend of Sonya Martemyanova? Well then, if anyone says Fyodorova is Ustimenko I've got orders from the General Staff of the Red Partisan Movement to tell that person that he can consider himself dead."

"What do you mean? And what has it got to do with me?" her face turning ashen, she asked fearfully, coming closer and trying not to notice the reek of stale alcohol on his breath.

"It has plenty to do with you because there was as little love lost between you and Ustimenko as between her and me. Only in my case the quarrel was about drinking and other immoral and unethical behaviour, and in your case it was teaching methods, I remember the stab you made at Aglaya at one meeting, I even applauded you from my corner. She hit back at you at another meeting, in the teachers' college assembly hall it was, remember? And then you took heart drops and screamed that you'd pay her back. Remember now?"

Tatyana Yefimovna played for time: What was this man after? Who was he—an agent-provocateur? And what All-Partisan General Staff was he talking about?

"Surely you haven't forgotten? You had an argument, a purely theoretical argument about friendship and a wrong understanding of friendship. As a case in point you mentioned our almighty Aglaya's nephew who didn't report his pals to you. He didn't inform you frankly, and you insisted that he ought to have informed you frankly. They all jumped out of the window or something. . . ."

"But what is all this to you anyway?" she cried in exasperation. "What possible connection can it have with Fyodorova?"

Averyanov smiled enigmatically. Both enigmatically and grimly.

"I give up!" Okayomova shrugged.

"I'll tell you what connection it can have," he said, bending close to her and frightening her with the glassy gleam in his eyes. "The connection is that maybe no later than today you'll be ordered to be frank in the sense of giving information. You'll

be ordered and threatened with all the penalties you know. But you keep mum! Or else . . ."

"So you're a partisan now, is that it?" she asked with a sneer.

"That is no business of yours," he said with dignity. "It's the business of the higher-ups, not for the likes of you. Anyway, I'm only a discharged chief accountant in your eyes. And you had a finger in that pie too, you wrote that I was not to be tolerated—what rot! Oh, I remember it all, old Averyanov remembers everything!"

Breathing loudly and angrily he pulled on his coat.

"If you inform against me, it will be as bad for you," he said briskly, whipping up the fur of his cap with his palm. "Very bad. I'm not such a terribly important bird, but I'm known, and after the war I'll make myself even better known. And I wouldn't be intolerable if you took the trouble to hand in your accounts on time. So much for you, comrade critics. Accounting has to be treated reverently, you can't play the same tricks as you do with school marks where you can violate anything. Accounting is nothing like your teaching and preaching."

He went on talking for a long time, wrathfully and sincerely, his voice shaking with emotion when he used his bookkeeper's terms. He regretted wasting the best years of his life at the public education department. He could have compiled a "classical textbook" on bookkeeping instead. Actually he had all the material there waiting to be compiled, but Aglaya herself had talked him into staying because if he left the accountant's office would be understaffed, and here he was now—a nobody.

"Yes, I'm a nobody!" he exclaimed tragically. "And even you, the driest old stick in the world of teachers, are. . ."

He stopped midway because he clearly heard sobbing. Tat'yana Yefimovna, holding the oil lamp in one hand and piteously covering her face with the other, was crying loudly and brokenly, her whole body shaking with the sobs.

"There you go! But why? There's no need, really!"

"No . . . it's because. . ." her voice was breaking into an ugly squeal, and she made a desperate effort to lower it. "It's because I only just realised it now: what have they reduced us to if you . . . have to go about warning people . . . they mustn't . . . betray! And you, of all people! Only please don't mind, please, for heaven's sake. . ."

"It's all right," he said vaguely, bewildered by her reaction. "It's possible. Why shouldn't a person be warned, he may quite

easily not be in the know. So her name is Fyodorova, remember? She's not Ustimenko, she's Fyodorova. That's all."

Putting the cap at a rakish angle on his tousled hair, he waved his hand in farewell, said something heartening and left. Out in the street he suddenly remembered that Zemskov, his one time assistant, later promoted to his chief accountant's job, lived near here, in Proreznaya Street. Averyanov felt no animosity towards him. Actually Zemskov had spoken up in his defence, calling him a most competent accountant, even though in private he did quarrel with him about his drinking and his language, and had once threatened to have him locked up if he did not stop swearing in front of the lady teachers, but for this Averyanov bore him no grudge. Zemskov missed his chance to leave town because his sister had been too ill to travel, and some time in September Averyanov, stunned by the grief of war and crushed by his own uselessness, had dropped in to see them. Zemskov and his sister Pasha—they were obviously devoted to one another—had received Averyanov with real human warmth. They had treated him to some pretty strong home-brewed beer and pancakes, prickly with bran it is true, but anyway there had been food, drink and conversation—pensive and unhurried on the part of the hosts, boastful and loud, as usual, on his own.

His thoughts more on that beer than on the quiet brother and sister, Averyanov knocked on the familiar door with the ragged baize round the edge. Pasha opened it. Being the sort of man who could not keep a secret and who could never simply call on friends without bringing some staggering news, Averyanov began telling the Zemskovs, no sooner he was inside, about his experience that morning, how they had "dragged" him to the Gestapo, how they had talked to him there, and how she (our former chief vixen herself, damn and blast her, I'll take her to Supreme Court anyway, you'll see) had closed her pretty eyes with loathing.

"Fancy that! Really!" said Zemskov, but the expression on his thin, dark face remained impenetrable.

"She certainly did!" cried Averyanov, his eyes following the movements of the slight, meek Pasha as she brought a jug of beer and a plate of smoked horseflesh to the table. "She certainly did! That she-devil loathes the sight of me!"

"Maybe it's not loathing. Maybe it's shame. It could be," Zemskov said.

"Not with their sort!"

"With whom?" Pasha suddenly put in, glancing briefly at Averyanov.

"With women like Ustimenko. . . ."

Zemskov raised his eyebrow mockingly, poured out another glass of beer for his former chief, and watched him drink it.

"Now, supposing it was you, Stepan Naumovich, they interrogated under torture, what would you do?" he asked.

"I'd spit in their faces," replied Averyanov, sucking a bit of horse gristle. "That's the partisan oath we've sworn."

"Partisan, did you say?" Zemskov asked with a faint smile. "You're not a partisan, are you?"

"Who knows!" replied Averyanov, helping himself to more beer. "That's high politics. Now, what do you do? Brew beer and smoke dead horses, because your job is to last through the war. But there are other people, understand? There are, and how! And those gasoline tanks that exploded just before New Year didn't set themselves on fire either, see?"

"Was it you did it?" Zemskov asked, with a gay lilt in his voice and a broad smile. "Was it really you?"

"What a nice, kind face he has!" Averyanov thought, and aloud he said: "Catch me giving secrets away for a rotten glass of beer! Oh no, brother, not me. . . ."

"Stepan Naumovich knows who did it but he'll never tell," Pasha said to her brother without looking at Averyanov, and tossed her long golden plait over her shoulder. "He understands that this is no time to talk about such things. Lives would be endangered. . . ."

"And how!" Averyanov confirmed darkly.

"You'd better hold your tongue too, old chap," he told Zemskov. "Did you see the hanging in Market Square? There'll be more to come. It's impossible for them not to hang, I heard enough at the Gestapo this morning."

"Just what did you hear?"

"All sorts of things."

"What things?" Pasha asked, leaning forward, her sharp elbows propped on the table. "I'm dying to hear. Or did you sign a paper you wouldn't?"

"I did, in Room No. 9. Under threat of death," Averyanov replied solemnly, and then broke into a shout: "But I'm no flunkie of theirs! You heard my plan, didn't you? I've already carried it out in part. Listen to me carefully, and then judge of this person who has been . . . chucked out. . . ."

"Dismissed," Zemskov corrected him. "But you really did drink and behave very badly, Stepan Naumovich, you were a menace to everyone. But that's beside the point. What did you want to tell us?"

"And I will tell you!" Averyanov shouted. "I will tell you! Come on, don't be mean with the drink, pour me out another glass, I'll swing in Market Square for what I'm doing anyway."

"Not really!" snickered Pasha.

"You think I won't?"

And, leaning his sunken chest hard on the table, frightening the brother and sister, as Okayomova before them, with his glassy stare, and shaking his finger, with black under the nail, he recounted word for word the conversation he had had "with that old dragon, Tatyana Yefimovna", and told them that he was now going straight into the "lion's den" for it was there that Aglaya's death most likely lay, and a terrible death too. His speech was lengthy, involved, and incoherent, he boasted outrageously of his supposedly enormous connections with those who directed the commando groups, but the Zemskovs, brother and sister, listened gravely, even sympathetically, as if they believed every word he said.

"It's all very good, it's excellent really," Zemskov said when the other had finished. "Alevtina Andreyevna, of course, is quite likely to betray Aglaya Petrovna, that is—identify her. Jealousy and spite, you're quite right, but you mustn't go there now, it's long past curfew, you'll be picked up by a patrol and arrested. And tonight particularly you should be as quiet as possible. . . ."

"I don't give a damn!" Averyanov said, getting to his feet. "In our job there can be no room for cowardice. D'you know what our fellows are?"

"All right, what?" Zemskov asked with a weary sigh.

"Our fellows are on furlough from death!" exclaimed Averyanov, peeping into the jug. "See? And I, too, I too am on furlough from death!" he said, striking his chest dramatically.

He fell asleep on the old couch covered with carpeting, and when he woke up he could not for a long time understand where he was. Getting up at last he lighted an oil lamp and, recognising Zemskov's room, called out. Since there was no immediate response he helped himself to a full glass of beer. The drink went to his head, he seemed to grow wings, and once again he fancied himself a warrior, a partisan, the most important, courageous and resolute of all. He would naturally love to talk some more,

but both his listeners were gone, neither answered when he called. "They must have gone to work," he thought regretfully. "My Margot, too, must have gone to unload timber again. And here am I, all by my wretched self!"

He recalled his experience at the Gestapo and how he had "fixed" Okayomova; he pictured how small Aglaya Petrovna would feel when she found out what sort of man she had averted her gaze from, actually closing her eyes, and then his daydreams took him to the distant future, to the day in the Supreme Court when the almighty Aglaya would fall on her knees before him.

"The little fool," he said aloud in a tenderly, maudlin voice. "The little idiot, she doesn't know whom she can count on. A drunkard, she says. But what you can't understand is that a clever man is twice as clever when he's drunk. I'll be off to see your friend Alevtina, in a minute, and I'll have a talk with her. I'll give her the works. She'll know what sort of people we are. Don't you worry, we won't give you away, but at the Supreme Court I'll tell them about those annual accounts. I'll tell them everything!"

He pushed his astrakhan cap to the back of his head, put on his coat, grunting with the effort, and forgetting his muffler went out into the frosty street, where his courage became quite reckless. He didn't give a damn for anyone, he'd defy the devil himself. Making his way past the frost-covered ruins of bombed houses, he came out into Hitlerstrasse, and shuddering from the cold broke into a song which suited his mood perfectly, even though he couldn't remember all the words. His old, quivering voice resounded in the darkness of this enemy-occupied, silenced town.

*We're fearless Red guerillas
and our names will ring
In songs that all the singers
of the land will sing.*

"Halt!" a voice shouted from the icy gloom.

"Halt yourself," Averyanov snapped.

"Halt!" The German shouted the warning again, in a loud, threatening voice.

"Go to hell, the bloody lot of you!" Averyanov roared back. "Stinking sausage-eaters, I'm not afraid of you, understand?"

He did not see the German soldiers with the word "Patrol" on their white armbands. Nor did he hear the shots. And he felt

no pain at all. When the bullet hit him he was no longer the drunkard, dismissed from work, the incorrigible foul-mouthed wrangler and barrator. He was a hero, a slightly tipsy hero-partisan, it is true, and he was singing:

*Of starry nights so clear and still,
Of rainy days, so gray and bleak,
When proudly, bravely on we marched!*

One More Show that Proved a Flop

It was the first case like it in the history of Group "C", and the victim turned out to be none other than Wenzlow himself. He did hear something about the "roasting and freezing" routine when he was in Berlin, though it was not practised here and it never entered his head that von Zanke would not have warned him against it.

Von Zanke began to shout and curse, like the true Prussian soldier he was, as he went up the stairs. When he got to the top he kicked the door open with such force that the glass panes fell in. And then, his voice rising to a shriek, he ordered the straps to be undone at once and stamped his feet in fury when he found that Wenzlow did not have the key. The soldiers, not having been initiated into the rules of the game, began to dash up and down the building in a panic; the terrified sentry switched on the alarm, and the men in the barracks below hurried into their clothes as if an enemy parachute force had suddenly landed on them. The chief went on screaming, and at one moment Wenzlow thought he even raised his gloved hand to strike him. He made an impressively wrathful figure—towering above the others in his tall crowned cap, with his strong chin out thrust and the stick gripped in a bony hand. And with his furious shouting, stamping and cursing, the elaborate ingeniousness of which Sonderkommandoführer Dieffenbach himself might well envy, von Zanke undoubtedly produced a powerful effect.

Before they could fetch the key, a flustered sergeant major cut through the chain with pliers. Then the chief himself tore open the straps, took a knife and sliced through the last resisting one. It was as spectacular as a Wild West film. Aglaya's legs buckled under her. In the instant before oblivion she heard him saying something nice and kind to her with an old man's commiserating "tut-tut", she felt him catch her and lay her down on a stretcher.

Above her, she saw the capless, shivering soldiers, paralysed with fear, the vapid stare on Wenzlow's upside-down face, the flickering light of electric torches, and a doctor in a white short coat. And then she passed out.

"Don't be angry with me, by boy," von Zanke said to Wenzlow as he took off his greatcoat in his office. "But you started on this case not quite keenly enough. We must get the key to the forest at whatever cost. We need the key so we can what?"

"So the devil can take you," Wenzlow thought maliciously.

"So we can what?" von Zanke repeated.

"So we can finish with the partisans."

"And we must finish with the partisans for the sake of what?"

"This is perhaps the most refined method of torture," Wenzlow said to himself.

Still, his answer was more or less satisfactory. The wordless, for ever subjugated communications were the end-all, of course. What more did the old ass want anyway?

Whereupon von Zanke turned on the tap.

There was no logic in his speech, no link between his rhetoric "so we can what?" and "in the name of what?" and the foregoing sentences. There was a sort of link, as a matter of fact, but Wenzlow only saw it much later. The crux of the matter was that undesirable information about Soviet victories in the large Kalinin-Yelets area was seeping in through the "forest people", or so the old fox supposed. What worried him was not the fact as such that "there was this lack of organisation in our Second Army" as he put it; the trouble was that it *had become known*. The people here also knew that Guderian and Höpner had been relieved, that Field Marshal von Bock had relinquished his post as commander of group "Zenter" and that Brauchitsch had been removed.

"They have a hectograph, they circulate leaflets!" he cried, glaring. "Talk about wordless, for ever subjugated communications! Our first defeat—do you realise what it means? It gives them what?"

"Pleasure, I expect," Wenzlow shrugged.

"It gives them oxygen! O-xy-gen! And it therefore follows that our task is to do what?"

"Deprive them of this oxygen!"

"Excellent, Wenzlow. But to achieve this we must do what?"

"Finish with the forest, I suppose," Wenzlow replied curtly. He was in no mood for profound conversation. "If we can..."

Von Zanke was not really listening, because if he had been Wenzlow's "if we can" would have landed him in trouble. Was there anything Group "C" could not do, the old goat would have said. Never mind, he'd see for himself in a minute what those Bolsheviks were like! Let him try and crack that hard little nut with his perfectly made dentures. It would do him good!

"Go and get a bit of a rest," the chief told him at last. "I'll see our lady's case through to the end. In my day I've been known to reach the finishing line not among the last by far. And you can tackle Zemskov, the accountant from the city council. But take your time and be very careful. I've looked at the findings, and I believe Zemskov may also hold a key to the bewitched forest kingdom of the Reds."

Wenzlow rose to his feet. "May I go?" he asked.

"Oh, certainly!" von Zanke exclaimed. "Go and have a drink, you look all in. O Lord, the work we're all doing here is difficult, isn't it?"

Left by himself, he poured some Curaçao into a glass, held it up to the light, and took a sip. He was not feeling well, there was a pain in the pit of his stomach and he had heartburn all the time. "Damn that peppery Spanish food!" these were the words he invariably used to recall his activity under Franco for which a hard-earned pension was paid to him regularly once every two months by the Generalissimo's ambassador in Berlin.

Yawning and sighing, he took a walk round the room, his senses alert to what was going on in his bowels. Then he called for his mail and a hot-water bottle, took another sip of the liqueur and shook his head regretfully.

Holding the hot-water bottle to his stomach, he sorted out the envelopes, ripped one open, and called Zollinger, the "good kid" on the inside phone.

"Please come in for a minute, my boy," he said in a tired voice, and when Zollinger walked in with a beaming smile, he asked: "D'you remember the case of that traitor Dr. Hummel?"

"Not the case, to be quite honest, but I. . ."

"Yes, yes," nodded his chief. "I understand. But there are some interesting points in it, exemplifying the great wisdom of the law of 1935. The law on what?"

A look of stupidity appeared on the "good kid's" face. He did not overtax his memory with dates and things. But the blasted

old nuisance had got onto his hobby horse again. Zollinger had to grin and bear it, even his "Gestapo within the Gestapo" card would not help him any here. No wonder his mother was always telling him that he lacked diligence.

"The Reich Freedom Congress in Nürnberg adopted a law. The law was what?"

"Inspired by genius, of course," he tried, with this minor provocation, to sidestep the issue. "All our laws are inspired by genius. Even all the miscalculations and errors of the command. Everything. . ."

"Yes, everything we do is indeed inspired by genius," von Zanke said in a voice of steel to put the young man in his place. "And do not try to make light of what is sacred, my boy. There is no forgiveness for it, and in your case especially. . ."

Zollinger was about to protest, but his chief did not let him speak.

"You can play your cat-and-mouse game with someone else, but never with us, old soldiers," he said dryly and sternly. "A provocation is good when it can be regarded in the same light as the formula on rights. What formula?"

"On rights?"

"That's another thing you don't know. The right of the people is that which is good for the people from the point of view of those ruling the people. Therefore, a provocation is good when it is beneficial to the people from the point of view of those ruling the people. These wonderful thoughts have often been voiced by whom?"

"The Führer?"

"No, not quite. They were voiced by Reichsjugendführer Baldour von Schirach. And you ought to know it. There is a great deal you ought to know, Obersturmführer Zollinger."

"Yes sir."

"And now listen," said von Zanke, and in a kind and gentle sermonising monotone proceeded to read aloud a document marked top secret.

Zollinger listened "like a good boy", playing with his mother-of-pearl penknife and yawning furtively. Reports coming from Prinz-Albrecht-Allee in Berlin were usually very long. The Gestapo had its own style—flowery, full of double meanings, veiled hints and winks, as between members of one family, which lent weight and importance to any trifle.

What the contents of this top secret report boiled down to was that the traitor Dr. Hummel, whom the Red partisans were hiding, had married a Hamburg Jewess, Ida Feinstein, in 1923, and had a son of mixed blood by her born in 1924 and named Otto. When the law on "safeguarding the purity of German blood and German honour" was passed, it was suggested that Hummel divorce his wife, but he refused to comply for a long time and finally declared that Ida Feinstein had taken her son Otto and disappeared he did not know where. However, as a special investigation proved, his statement was a lie. Ida Feinstein, it was established, had only disappeared from the surveillance organs by making vile and deceitful use of the fact that in appearance she looked Aryan, and by obtaining counterfeit documents. Meanwhile she was maintaining a regular and secret correspondence with her husband. In October 1939, the Jewess Ida Feinstein, who worked as a resident oculist at the Mary Magdalene children's hospital under the name of Erna Laschwitz, was tracked down by the secret political police, arrested, and sent to a concentration camp. Otto, the son of the traitor, resisted his mother's arrest and was shot. When Hummel's crime became known, his wife was hanged in the camp. . . .

And of this Berlin was advising Group "C".

Furthermore, Berlin urged Group "C" and Standartenführer von Zanke to do their utmost to find Hummel and hand the criminal over to "B-4" forthwith for special interrogation.

Von Zanke sighed as he read the closing words. Every line in this document held a reproach. What a chance lost, what a case to have left unfinished, what an elegant trial to miss!

"Well, it is a nice kettle of fish!" said Zollinger. "It's a pity we didn't tell Berlin that it was not Hummel himself but just his dead body that the partisans got. Herz couldn't have missed, I know because I went into it myself. Of course it was the corpse they spirited away, and if we'd told this version no one would have bothered us any more."

Von Zanke got up and fetched a bottle of kümmel: maybe kümmel would taste better than curaçao?

"The point at issue is not that traitorous louse," he said, clutching the hot-water bottle to his stomach. "The point is Jewry which we must seek out everywhere. And we are treating this matter in a superficial manner."

The kümmel was as tasteless as the curaçao. And his cigar smelt like straw.

"Incidentally, will we ever put an end to it here?" he asked peevishly. "Or are we such nervous wrecks, so overworked and so incompetent that we cannot manage by ourselves, and must ask for a special group to help us? What do you think, my boy? Who would you entrust this operation to?"

"If I were given the honour..." Zollinger began.

"We must plan it carefully and arrange for the lorries," the chief said unhurriedly, massaging his stomach with the hot-water bottle. "We shall call the operation Good Night, the same as it was called in Poznan. It's not entirely clear to me yet what's behind it, but information has come in that the oncological hospital, for one, is intending to put up a resistance. It is alleged that a certain doctor there—exactly who it has not yet been established—said 'Just let them try.' I shall give you the secret service report..."

Zollinger got to his feet.

"We'll do our best!" His eyes were flashing. "Rely on me, Herr Standartenführer, you will be pleased with the operation Good Night. Trust me. The Reichsführer is sure to thank us. If there's one thing I'm good at it's cooking a stew of this kind..."

His chief grimaced fastidiously: he could not stand such vulgar expressions as "I'll hammer his head into his shoulders", "cook a stew", "swing on a branch head down" and suchlike. All those things had their special, approved and polite names, so why be coarse...

"Very good," he said coldly. "We'll work out the details later."

Having read his mail and dictated the answers to Dog's Death, he rang up Dr. Schäffer and asked him if his dear patient was still asleep. Schäffer replied that she was not, in spite of the horse dose of drugs he had given her.

"Splendid. I'll come and see her at once," von Zanke said, hanging up.

He changed in the service bedroom next door to the office in his usual leisurely manner. Now that he had changed his uniform for a soft smoking jacket, trimmed with silk braid, a pair of amber-coloured pyjama trousers and a fez over one ear, he looked like the nicest of old burghers, a boorish but kindly soul, a very elderly man who had known every sort of trouble in his life, one of those shrewd old characters who always remain philosophically good-natured. This transformation was called "Form 3" by the old Gestapo fox. Even the

sophisticated Reichsführer Himmler himself never ceased to marvel at it.

And so this nice old man, grunting softly as he leaned on his stick, and pressing the freshly refilled hot-water bottle to his stomach (the hot-water bottle went well with "Form 3") entered the white room where Aglaya Ustimenko lay on a tall, wide and comfortable bed, fighting off the drugged sleep that was threatening to envelop her.

Schäffer (who also looked like a good-hearted German doctor) sprang to attention and barked out the greeting established for "Form 3". It was designed to convey to the "object" (in this case Aglaya) that he or she was in the presence of a most senior officer. It had been established with absolute scientific veracity in the gruesome laboratories of the SS that "objects" armed with a strong ideology and possessing a sound intellect were completely immune to uniforms, regalia, and the pomp accompanying the appearance of the highest officials of the secret political police, be they Otto Ohlendorf, Eichmann, Heydrich or Himmler himself. Mere curiosity was all that was ever registered, and even that only rarely. On the other hand it was noted, in exceptional cases it is true, that a modest, gentle and sympathetic attitude displayed by the highest authorities brought certain positive results.

Reading in Aglaya's eyes an acknowledgement of his importance, von Zanke padded softly in his felt slippers to the bedside. He was stunned by the Bolshevik woman's bright, vivid beauty (they had beaten her, after all!), the dark eyes, baleful but calm, and the ears, tiny and classically shaped. He puckered up his face, noticing the bruise on her neck, just under the chin. . . .

A smile of compassion slowly spread over his wrinkled, jowly face, he massaged his stomach again with the hot-water bottle, and began to speak in a low confiding voice.

"It's terrible, it's bad, it's impossible! I want madame to know. . . . Oh, I don't know how to say it in Russian! I want madame to know that I am a soldier. That and nothing else! I'm an old Army general. Orders! Attention! Soldier! Attention! That's me. That and nothing else. But this scum, forgive me madame, these dirty Gestapo men, these nazis do everything differently. Our Führer doesn't know! Our generals don't know! And I, Lieutenant-General von Zoren (he altered his name just to be on the safe side) on behalf of the command of the Reich armies bring you our most humble apologies. We are at war,

of course. But our German armies are not the ones to disgrace themselves by such ignoble deeds. You shall have a good rest. You will have plenty of good food, the most delicious dishes, and then you will go *nach hause*! To the peace and quiet of your home to be with your good mother your good father. And now you must have a good, long sleep, yes? Good sleep, a good rest, and sweet dreams. . . ."

And suddenly Standartenführer Colonel Ulrich von Zanke, Himmler's trusted assistant and Ohlendorf's close friend, Eichmann's teacher and Heydrich's helpmate, Canaris's henchman, one of the few advisers of Adolf Hitler himself in creating the machinery of the Reich Security Administration, and inspiring the first mass executions carried out by the SS, and chief of Group "C" East—suddenly realised that the hand he was playing against this cursed Bolshevik woman was irrevocably lost with no chance of a replay.

She had not uttered a word, she had not interrupted him or shown impatience. She had simply guessed who he was, who he really was, and not in the sense he imagined she did when Dr. Schäffer introduced him as Lieutenant-General von Zoren. It reminded him of that old story about Little Red Riding Hood, except that in this case the Bolshevik Red Riding Hood knew the wolf at once for all his sheep's clothing, and when he began to lull her to sleep with his honeyed words, she realised that he wanted her to fall asleep for his own reasons, and as she realised this a stubborn, stabbing light flashed in her dark, sombre eyes. He saw it and knew the game was lost. What he did not understand, though, was that besides losing the game as a whole, he had also lost out in the matter of her falling asleep as he wanted her to do. And so he got up to go and, holding the hot-water bottle to his stomach, wished her good night in his meek and kindly manner: "Sleep well, sweet dreams! Sleep now! And then home, home, sweet home, Madame Fyodorova!"

As he turned to leave, he narrowed his eyes slightly, to signal to Dr. Schäffer that she *must* sleep. The doctor dropped his eyes. Although for many years now the abilities of this medical rat of the Gestapo had been dedicated to the science of extermination, he was still just a tiny bit ashamed. But he was first of all a fascist, then a doctor. . . .

Von Zanke left. The old, grey medical rat pursed his lips in thought, flung open the door of the medicine chest, and wondered: "Now what will be the best thing to give her intravenously to

induce sleep? The chief has ordered it in no uncertain terms. But will she let me?"

At last Dr. Schäffer filled a syringe and humming a little song approached the bed, really looking like a big-bellied Mother Rat trotting on its hind legs. He stopped short, exactly like a rat at the sight of lots of gorgeous food. He paused and actually twitched his nose, sniffing like a rat: the Bolshevik woman was asleep.

She lay on her side, her cheek cushioned in her hand, breathing as evenly as a healthy and terribly tired person was supposed to breathe. Those excellent sleeping-draughts, German sleeping-draughts produced by Bayer and the I.G. Farbenindustrie which he had given her when she was still unconscious had done the job. How gratifying that those German pills had finally broken the Russian's resistance. She was asleep.

Ah, the greatness of Bayer! The Mother Rat took the woman's pulse: excellent, just a little too fast, perhaps. Maybe he'd better give her a shot anyway.

He took her by the elbow to turn her arm a little for the injection, but she jerked away, muttering angrily and sleepily, and pulled the blanket right up to her pink shell-like ear.

"No, no, it's a good, healthy sleep," Schäffer decided.

And summoning Erich Hertz—the feldsher who killed Hummel with a bullet from his sniperscope rifle, and had since been transferred to Group "C" and decorated with a cross for his exemplary devotion to the great cause of the Führer—he left him in charge and went to report to the chief that the patient was fast asleep.

"Are you sure?" von Zanke asked testily.

"Absolutely."

"I'm delighted that there's one person in this rotten outfit who is sure of something," von Zanke said vengefully and ambiguously. "It's an enormous achievement. The Bolshevik woman believed me, and it's most important that this faith of hers should not be swayed. . . ."

He knew he was not speaking the truth, yet even to himself he would not admit that the "Form 3" routine had been a flop. The least this woman on whom so much depended could do was fall asleep. Meditatively, he tapped his fingernails against the glass of absinthe in front of him. . . .

But Aglaya understanding that it was essential to their schemes that she sleep, pitched her will in a difficult, exhausting battle

against the products of the great Bayer, against the chemists and pharmacologists of I.G. Farbenindustrie.

Feigning sleep, she fought against sleep.

The bed seemed to rock her gently, shallow waves rolled away languidly to the far horizon, the sun was sinking behind the sandy spit, and Volodya, wearing a Young Pioneer tie, was walking towards her with a shy, radiant smile, and there was her brother Afanasy, the pilot who was killed in action over Madrid, looking fixedly and sternly at her, and then Rodion suddenly turned round and went up the gang plank, and when he had reached the deck of his ship he saluted her, stiffly and curtly. . . .

"Yes, yes, I know," she whispered. "I do understand."

She pinched herself cruelly—her knees, shins and shoulders—as hard as she could with her sharp nails. Then she clamped her teeth on the inside of her cheek, and tasted blood. She bit into her other cheek. Anything to fight off sleep, to overcome that cursed nazi chemistry, to beat the pot-bellied doctor, and the lulling tick-tock of the clock on the wall. But why did they want her to sleep?

"Because, my dear Herr Doctor," von Zanke was saying to Schäffer just then, "because while she's fast asleep we shall have her identified by all those people with whom she's had business or private connections. Once we know for certain, with all guess-work ruled out, who she is: Ustimenko or Fyodorova, we shall take action accordingly. If she is Ustimenko I shall mobilise my entire secret service force to track down her contacts after she has been released, on what is known as my short-leash method. It will be worthwhile. On the other hand, if she is merely Fyodorova, I shall naturally let her go, because a small town school teacher, who is not a communist, will soon forget the brief moments of discomfort she suffered here, but then she will be sure to tell everyone about my 'Form 3', that is about our humane treatment of her at a time like the present. But come to think of it, maybe we should get rid of her precisely because she is of no use to us. It's safer. Let our experiment with 'Form 3' die with her. . . ."

The door opened softly and in walked Wenzlow. His eyes twinkled spitefully.

"Yes, what have you got to say, my boy?" von Zanke asked in a bored voice, the tone of which implied that he was in no mood to hear what anyone had to say.

"Averyanov, the accountant," Wenzlow said, restraining the note of triumph in his voice, "who, you said, ought not to have been released, was killed in Hitlerstrasse an hour ago. In spite of the early hour, the swine was already roaring drunk. I examined the body: he wore a good suit, a new overcoat, and altogether he looked as if he had been celebrating his return from our hospitable house."

Von Zanke took a sip of absinthe.

"I'm glad to hear it," he said indifferently. "Excellent. Unless the deceased has mixed up our cards, that is while he was still alive, of course. But I like to be wrong for the better."

"But how could he have mixed up our cards, and when?"

"They always manage to do it somehow, I'm sorry to say," the chief said sorrowfully. "Our work is harder here than anywhere else. Why?"

"Damn the old devil, and his whys!" Wenzlow thought with hatred. "We're like pupils, taking these everlasting exams!"

But this time there was no exam. The chief looked at his watch, handed Wenzlow a typewritten list of people who might be able to identify Ustimenko-Fyodorova, and told him to have them brought in at once.

"Round up the whole lot of them, my boy. Obersturmführer Zollinger is in charge of the operation. The arrested must not exchange a word. Get them out of bed and bring them straight here, no talking, no explanations. The first on the list goes in alone..." He took the list from Wenzlow and, holding it at arm's length, read: "Valentina Andreyevna Stepanova..." And with a nod at Dr. Schäffer: "You are to watch. Very carefully."

Wenzlow went out. One after another the Gestapo's Opels came driving up to the front door, their tyres squealing on the packed snow. Frau Miesel, wearing an army coat and a man's cap with a long vizor and a tall crown, stood shivering on the steps.

"Well, at least they'll hang her today, I suppose," Dog's Death said. "All that fuss over one person..."

"I do not discuss the command's orders with anyone," Wenzlow told her dryly. "I wouldn't advise you to, either."

The driver held open the door for him, and stood at attention.

"It's so cold again, Karl. Damned cold. You'd feel a lot warmer in bed with your wife, eh Karl?"

He believed it paid to joke with the men sometimes.

In the meantime, the pot-bellied Mother Rat, or the learned Dr. Schäffer, was making final preparations. Erich Hertz, the feldsher who was now acting as a stage hand, tiptoed about the room, laying a rug from the door to the bed. The learned Dr. Schäffer—now the lighting man—expertly directed a soft beam of light at Aglaya's face, for which she was grateful since it helped her fight off sleep. When the stage was set, the chief producer Standartenführer von Zanke was notified.

"Very good," said the producer. "Excellent."

Erich Hertz stood at attention in the doorway. He was dying to get another medal to pin on his chest. And this exciting morning sent his hopes soaring.

Operation Night and Fog XXI

His limpid violet-coloured eyes gazed at Zhovtyak fixedly and attentively. Although the day had just begun Baron zu Stakkelberg und Waldeck was already slightly loaded, but continued taking leisurely sips of French armagnac, without offering Zhovtyak a glass. He never did any more.

"The local inhabitants, I regret to say, did not break into applause," he said with a crooked smile. "Rather the contrary, certain excesses such as whistling and swearing could be observed."

Professor Zhovtyak sighed.

"We had the lights on for the second showing," continued zu Stakkelberg. "Our men sat in front of the screen facing the audience. Everything went smoothly. And did you yourself like the film?"

"I was highly flattered," Zhovtyak bowed. "My services to the German Reich are as yet so insignificant..."

He spoke through an interpreter. The man translated quickly, shifting his deep-set eyes from the commandant to Zhovtyak. Standing with his fat backside stuck out as if poised for a bow, the interpreter raised and dropped his voice to stress the depth and importance of the commandant's utterings, but condensed the Bürgermeister's flowing phrases to the barest essentials, thereby stressing the enormousness of the distance between the German command and this bald-headed Bürgermeister.

The commandant took a sip of armagnac and asked: "Have you any requests?"

"I'd like to ask you, Herr Commandant..." Zhovtyak mumbled, but the interpreter cut him short.

"It is customary with us to address the senior officer in the third person plural. Be good enough to abide by this instruction henceforward."

"Thank you. I would like to ask the Herr Commandant if they..." Zhovtyak began, getting muddled and sweating profusely. "I would ask them to inform me somewhat more fully on the question of food supplies for the hospitals..."

Choosing the most tactful phrases, he went into a long-winded description of the somewhat difficult food situation obtaining in the oncological institute, the children's hospital, and the Polunin hospital. But Baron zu Stakkelberg und Waldeck did not hear him to the end. Jerking up his chin and running a finger inside his starched collar, he asked if the professor knew anything about the Operation Good Night scheduled for that evening.

No, Zhovtyak did not know anything about it.

"We've changed the name now," said zu Stakkelberg. "That one had a cheap, music-hall flavour. And anyway why invent anything newfangled when we've got names like 'Night and Fog'—so dear to every German? That which will take place in our town tonight is officially entitled Operation Night and Fog XXI. The Roman numerals designate the number of the particular operation..."

Opening a box of cigars he chose one thoughtfully, cut off the end and lit it with care. A cruel expression appeared in his violet-coloured eyes.

"*Nacht- und Nebelerlaß!*" he said sharply. "Night and Fog! *Sonderhandlung!* You are our man, you must learn to use our special terminology. In Group "C" they do not trust you very far, they are inclined to suspect everyone, but I know you from birth, literally, and I trust you..."

"The Herr Major says how favourably disposed he is towards you," the broad-beamed interpreter translated very courteously. "You must learn our special terminology."

Being a cautious sort, he said nothing about Group "C". The Major was altogether too indiscreet to his liking with this bald-headed chap. But, of course, it was drinking Armaniac from early morning after a sleepless night...

"Night and Fog is a cipher meaning the extermination of certain sections of the civilian population," said zu Stakkelberg.

"Just as Sonderhandlung means special treatment. . . . However, you don't have to know this. Your job is Night and Fog. . . ."

He came round the desk and began pacing up and down, his highly polished boots gleaming when he turned on his heel. Holding the cigar carefully so as not to drop the ash, and taking occasional sips of Armaniac, he told the Bürgermeister exactly what would happen that night. Zhovtyak's first sensation was a dryness in his mouth and throat. And then his face became senilely flabby with all the muscles sagging, and he felt too weak to move a finger. His first thought was that the commandant's sense of humour had run away with him. No, he must be drunk, but that was hardly true, certainly he was slightly under the weather but he stood firmly on his feet and did not sway. His violet-coloured eyes were taking on a glassy look, but his speech was more clipped and brusque than usual.

"My great fatherland," he was saying, "has drawn up a programme of euthanasia. A man of your education must know that thenatos in Greek means death. The Führer's sublime humanism has manifested itself here as well. Euthanasia is an easy death, a painless death. Carbon monoxide is unsurpassed in bringing about mass euthanasia. All that is inferior must be liquidated. It is our primary and vital task. The patients from your hospitals will be removed tonight in special vans to the area of. . . ."

He went up to the map of the town hung on the wall, twitched an eyebrow, adjusted his monocle more securely, and then tapped with his finger at the very spot where Zhovtyak usually rented a cottage for the summer.

"This meadow here. A ditch is being dug there now, of the anti-tank type, or perhaps we'll use the ditches you have prepared for us," he chuckled. "Amusing, isn't it? According to our calculations, by the time the van reaches this spot euthanasia of its passengers will have been completed. The prisoners, stationed along the ditches under a suitable guard, will receive the bodies, arrange them in the ditches in proper order, and after that they, too, will be liquidated, but they'll have to be shot, and you will be present. . . ."

"You must be present—it's an order," the broad-beamed interpreter said.

"Yes, but I. . . ." Zhovtyak began to get up from his armchair.

"According to our calculations it will be early morning," continued zu Stakkelberg, completely ignoring Zhovtyak's stifled

exclamation, and taking another drink of Armaniac. "We shall take a film of the operation, not all of it, of course, just the concluding chord, the coda, if I may say so. You will direct the execution of the Red partisans, symbolising by your participation the hatred of the Russians for the forest bandits. You, who have already been photographed as the most humane of physicians, of scholars, you, who have already been shown on the screen and watched by Reichsleiter Göring, who has expressed approval of our policy, you will personify, you will symbolise unity in the struggle against communism. . . ."

"Those are your orders," concluded the interpreter.

"Obersturmführer Zollinger of Group 'C' will receive you and give you your instructions. By the way, they are investigating a rumour about some doctor or other who is alleged to have said 'Just let them try!' in connection with our euthanasia programme. You will give your views on this matter to Obersturmführer Zollinger. . . ."

Weak-kneed, his legs feeling heavy and awkward, Zhovtyak stumbled out of the building. He went to his office, took two tablespoonfuls of bromide, relaxed in a chair for a few minutes with closed eyes, and then wended his way to the Gestapo. The "good kid" welcomed Zhovtyak like an old friend, patting his stomach with undue familiarity; he seated him in an armchair, poured him a glass of kummel but only took a tumbler of mineral water himself, and speaking through his interpreter—a glum, red-faced youth from one of the Baltic states—very efficiently and quickly squeezed the name Ogurtsov out of the Bürgermeister.

"No one else could have said, 'Just let them try,'" Zhovtyak assured him. "I knew him when he was a medical student, he is impudent and a troublemaker besides. He stayed here not because he wanted to, but because he had just had an operation for appendicitis, Dr. Postnikov performed it. Complications set in, and Dr. Postnikov barely managed to save him. . . ."

Zollinger listened attentively. He loved dealing with people who, in the Gestapo lingo, were called "frankies". Just squeeze them a bit and they would spill everything. But, unfortunately, they were so few. . . .

"Well, and Postnikov?" Zollinger asked.

"What about Postnikov?" Zhovtyak got frightened.

The "good kid" turned a contemplative gaze on Zhovtyak and did not speak. Silence is the best method with "frankies." They

cannot stand a pause. It makes them jittery, they see themselves being shot or hanged.

"I don't understand, what Postnikov has got to do with this?" Zhovtyak was rattled. "I'm surprised, really. He was in the white army, you know."

Zollinger smiled: a smile also worked sometimes. It intimated that at the Gestapo they knew immeasurably more than one could possibly imagine.

"Just when was he in the white army? I've seen his documents, there's no mention of it there. The testimonials he has from the Soviet health service are superlative. Are you quite sure that Postnikov really served in the white army?"

"I am."

"How long, d'you know?"

"Not very long. . . ."

"And to be exact?"

"Seventeen days."

"Will you answer for your statement?"

"Naturally, Herr Obersturmführer. The fact is that Postnikov concealed his white army record from the Bolsheviks. To be exact, it was I who advised him to do so. It was a dangerous, a most dangerous thing to do at that time, and so naturally he's very grateful to me."

"Would you be willing to vouch for him? Can you guarantee that it was not Postnikov who said 'Just let them try'? You do appreciate that, regardless of your standing with us, it will be a grave responsibility to take?"

"Oh, bother the man! Maybe it was Postnikov who said it!" Zhovtyak thought in an agony of indecision.

But it was too late to back out of it.

And so he confirmed it, speaking very strongly, he thought.

"Postnikov is our man. I vouch for him on my honour."

Zollinger and the interpreter exchanged glances. Zhovtyak felt a gnawing pain in the pit of his stomach. Even in this place they regarded him as a traitor. Even they had no faith in his honesty. Even they whom he served so loyally and devotedly. . . .

The car would call for him at 8 a.m. sharp, Zollinger told him. He looked at his time-table again and said: yes, 8 a.m. sharp. The operation was scheduled for 9.20 a.m.

Zhovtyak left the Gestapo feeling quite ill. The sight of the special vans that had just arrived made things even worse. He actually felt nausea and a moment's dizziness. Out in the street,

however, he forced himself to read the order about the forthcoming execution of a hundred hostages, which was to be carried out as a retaliation of the Reich command for the brutal murder of one German soldier. "Similar measures will also be taken in the future, because our command. . . ."

Zhovtyak read it through carefully, and as carefully examined the familiar signature: zu Stakkelberg und Waldeck. When he got home at last, feeling sorry for himself and bewailing his fate, he slowly took off his polecat-lined coat with the beaver collar, his boyar hat, and his overshoes, and went into the dining room. He took out of his pocket the heavy revolver given him by zu Stakkelberg with the injunction that "in case of anything" he had to sell his life dearly to the "Red bandits", and put it on the table. He accepted it with a grateful smile simply as a gift, when he found out how the land lay he began to take his personal weapon more seriously. He learnt how to take it apart, oil it and put it together again, and in his spare time aimed long and carefully at some harmless object, say the paraffin lamp or the teapot, pursing his purple lips and closing one eye. . . .

When at home he always kept the revolver in full view and close at hand.

This time he forgot to bark and growl, which he usually did the moment he came home. The thought of tomorrow morning appalled him, he even mumbled "O God!" but told himself at once to pull himself together and calm his nerves because nervous cells could never be regenerated. What he immediately needed was some food, for he was near collapse from weakness. Having made himself two soft-boiled eggs, some toast and a glass of hot milk, he reasoned that this was no day for a strict diet, and for a start drank a big glass of vodka. The alcohol—unfailing weapon of cowards—bucked him up, and walking up and down the room in his shabby house shoes, he held a discourse with himself about Marshal Petain who, like himself, wanted no war, although he was a marshal, or even a field marshal.

"And I'm a civilian!" he cried aloud. "I'm a physician, I'll have you remember, and I refuse to shed anyone's blood. And no one can force me to! I'm a free man, and I understand you, Monsieur Petain."

The effect of the vodka wore off very quickly, and he again began to mope. The minutes sped on tirelessly, bringing tomorrow's operation nearer.

He really needed a tonic: his strength was ebbing.

Groaning and sighing he went down the stairs to his basement treasure house, played the beam of his flashlight on the walls to make sure that no damp had seeped in, sniffed in one suspicious corner, found two opened bottles of old cognac, carefully locked the door of the treasure house behind him, went back to the dining room, made himself some Turkish coffee—strong and sweet, and sat down at the table with the firm resolve to get drunk. The Georgian brandy, he discovered, tasted ever so much better than the stuff the Germans offered him, and he delivered a whole monologue out loud on this subject: "Our herring, too, is far better than theirs with that sweet sauce, and when you think of bread, it just makes you laugh. The same goes for tobacco. Their tobacco is rotten, a foul ersatz for all its flavouring. Our cheapest kind tastes more like real tobacco to me and I'm a choosy smoker. Their vodka is really disgusting, it's made from beetroot, their canned fruit is no match on ours, and even hogs would refuse to drink the swill they call rum! Oh no, our food is better!"

In this sense Professor Zhovtyak suddenly turned out to be the patriot of patriots.

Still, he was unable to get really good and drunk.

At eight o'clock someone began to bang on the front door: it was Postnikov, that rude knocking was his.

Cursing his caller roundly, Zhovtyak went into his watchdog act, barking for such a long time that he was quite sick of the sound himself. After that he pretended to drag the dog away, and only then reluctantly let in Postnikov. The man looked pale, tired and angry.

"Why d'you always bang so hard as if there's a fire or something?" Zhovtyak said crossly, and as though hearing a sound at the far end of the corridor turned and shouted: "Quiet, Zeus!"

"My calls on you, by the way, are never social, they're always business calls," Postnikov answered harshly. "And as a rule it's business that cannot be put off."

"Pity I didn't put the brandy away," Zhovtyak thought regretfully. "He's sure to guzzle a whole tumblerful."

Postnikov's clothes—a kind of service jacket, which though shabby showed a snow-white undercollar, shining riding breeches with a cavalryman's stripe, and well-polished riding boots—his grey moustache with the tips sticking out rigidly, his cropped hair and the icy stare in his milky-blue eyes, gave him the look of an old general, and Zhovtyak said so at once.

"Ah, yes, of course, if my life had followed a normal course instead of zigging and zagging, I'd certainly be a divisional surgeon now at the very least, or in other words a surgeon general. However, I didn't come here to talk about my life..."

"I should hope not..."

Their glances met for one moment: Postnikov's was full of controlled, deep-seated hatred, and Zhovtyak's expressed nothing. It was slightly dog-like and a little maudlin from too much brandy.

"The Gestapo have arrested Ogurtsov..."

"Ogurtsov? What Ogurtsov is that?"

"You wouldn't know, would you?"

"But why d'you insist that I should know him?"

"Because you know many people. And besides in your job you're expected to know people. And so, if you've forgotten Ogurtsov, make an effort to remember him."

Zhovtyak wrinkled his forehead, straining his memory. After all, he could not permit himself to recall him right away.

"It's amazing how expertly you can lie on all and every occasion," said Postnikov. "Can't get a straight word out of you, you're always up to some trick..."

"Oh, you mean that bosom friend of your beloved Ustimenko?" Zhovtyak slapped his forehead, as if just remembering. "I remember Ustimenko, a sulky sort of chap..."

"This has nothing to do with Ustimenko or who was who's bosom pal," said Postnikov, walking round the table and taking a good look at the butter and the ham. "All right, supposing he was his bosom pal. Ogurtsov was our student. He is a gifted surgeon with a big future ahead of him, and he's got to be rescued and saved at all costs..."

Postnikov sat down, stretched out his long legs in their patched and polished riding boots, felt in his pockets for a cigarette and finding none helped himself to a German cigarette from Zhovtyak's silver box.

"I think I'll offer him a glass of brandy," thought Zhovtyak, but quashed his decision at once because Postnikov might interpret even this casual offer of a drink as a certain admission of fear and a sort of bribe.

"Go ahead and rescue him if you must," said Zhovtyak, shrugging his plump shoulders, and pushing the escaping ends of his necktie back inside his waistcoat. "My relations with them are not such that I could rescue anyone..."

"And just what are your relations with them?" Postnikov inquired in a quivering voice. "The way I see it: if a person can put someone in jail, he can also rescue him. . . ."

"Who is that person who can put someone in jail?"

"Why, you, of course," Postnikov said, waving in his direction. "D'you think I don't know? Everyone knows your professional and personal relationship with them."

"I refuse to be insulted!" Zhovtyak suddenly shrieked. "How dare you! I'll . . . I'll . . ."

"Quiet!" Postnikov said with calm loathing, silencing his host's shrilling. "No hysterics, please! It's you who got Ogurtsov arrested, it's perfectly clear to everyone, because he laughed at your film, and now they'll certainly hang him. Well then, you must right this wrong at once, or else you'll be sorry."

"I will?" Zhovtyak sneered.

"Yes, very sorry," Postnikov said menacingly, and poured himself a teacup of brandy.

"And who'll make me sorry, I wonder?"

"I will, if no one else," said Postnikov. "I'll kill you, that's all. Actually it's a wonder I didn't do it before now."

He took a drink from the cup, wiped his moustache with a snow-white handkerchief, and peered closely at Zhovtyak, as if he really wondered why the man was there before him, alive and whole, pink-checked and benignant, for all his malignancy.

"You wonder that you haven't killed the person you owe your very life to?" Zhovtyak asked in a voice that was so hurt it even shook. "Surely, you must be joking? To forget all that. . . ."

"Is it to you I owe my life?"

"Most definitely so!"

"In what sense exactly, Dr. Zhovtyak?"

"In the sense that you, a most ungrateful person, Mr. Postnikov, handed me an application, when you came to work for me, or rather to ask for employment, in which you were fool enough to write, you will excuse the fool I hope, about those seventeen days' service in the white army. And it was I, who didn't know you at all but who trusted in your decency and honesty alone, and wished you nothing but good from the bottom of my heart, it was I who advised you to conceal the fact. . . ."

"And I did," Postnikov said with a hoarse chuckle. "I did just that. And this is what my decency and honesty has brought me to—working under a traitor. A Judas. . . ."

Zhovtyak raised his hand in protest.

"Yes, a Judas!" Postnikov went on. "And all my shilly-shallying has brought me to where instead of being with the Red Army..."

"Exactly!" Zhovtyak caught up gladly. "Yes, instead of scampering to the Urals with the Red Army, you're bringing succour to the suffering here..."

"Quiet!" Postnikov shouted with brutal vehemence. "Shut your mouth!"

Zhovtyak shut up, blinking in fright. Slowly, Postnikov moved aside the bottles and the saucepan in which the eggs had been boiled, and reached for the revolver. He must have only just noticed it lying there. Zhovtyak shivered, not for the first time that evening.

"For self-defence?" Postnikov asked, tossing up and catching the German commandant's gift. "Or are you gradually learning to kill people?"

"You'd better put it down," Zhovtyak said. "One should never fool with firearms."

"But I'm not fooling, there's no fooling about this. I'm simply examining your little gun..."

"Still, I insist on dotting all my i's," continued Zhovtyak, watching the revolver in Postnikov's hands, and feeling a chill run down his spine. "If you hadn't concealed that service record of yours from the Bolsheviks, they would have quite naturally eaten you up alive ages ago!"

"They wouldn't have eaten me alive, but you've been making a meal of me for a long time. I've been performing operations for you all my life, writing your papers for you, and here I am—almost a traitor because of you."

He removed the clip, threw out the cartridge, and taking a quick aim at Zhovtyak pressed the trigger.

"Stop it!" Zhovtyak cried, backing hurriedly. "What the devil are you doing?"

"Scared you?" Postnikov asked, smiling. "Love life, do you?"

"What a stupid thing to ask!" Zhovtyak said shrugging, and wiping his bald crown, which had suddenly become beaded with sweat. "It's stupid and unfair. You're here to ask me a favour, you came to plead for Ogurtsov. But you don't know that when it was first rumoured that the Germans were... how shall I put it... that the Germans, you know, were planning to carry out a certain operation in accordance with their system of exterminating the weak and the Jews..."

"Yes, yes, go on!" Postnikov was on the alert at once.

"It was Ogurtsov and none other who went and said to someone somewhere 'Just let them try'. He meant it as a threat, in a terroristic sense really. . . ."

"And you reported him?"

"They themselves reported it to me."

"They did? But why should they say it was Ogurtsov, when it was I and not Ogurtsov at all who said those words at the oncological institute?"

"You?" Zhovtyak asked, pointing his finger at Postnikov.

"Yes. And, unfortunately, I wasn't discreet enough and said it in front of a German inspector. But there was a crowd there, he didn't grasp it at first, and then everything got mixed up."

"There you are, there you are!" Zhovtyak cried triumphantly. "You're calling me all those dirty names, and I'm saving your life for the second time. . . ."

"You are saving my life?" Postnikov turned pale as he suddenly guessed the awful truth. "By pinning it on Ogurtsov, you mean?"

"I'm not pinning anything on anyone," Zhovtyak became rattled again. "I didn't know a thing about Ogurtsov, I'm hearing it for the first time from you just now, what I mean to say is that if they didn't arrest you at once it was only because they know that you're backed by me, because they know of our connection."

"And just what is this connection?" Postnikov asked icily. "What special connection is it exactly? You'll oblige me no end by explaining it to me in detail. . . ."

With his large and very thin white hands he gently inserted the clip into the revolver, drove the cartridge into the barrel, and cocked the gun. Zhovtyak watched his sure movements with an owl-like stare, feeling no longer just vaguely afraid but knowing for a certainty that this man was quite capable of killing him.

"Well then, what is this connection?" Postnikov insisted.

"We're comrades. Friends," Zhovtyak replied, neither understanding nor hearing his own words. "As my colleague, you. . . ."

"We have no connection whatsoever," Postnikov said calmly. "I despised you always, but I was afraid of you, you see. But I'm not afraid of you any more. I have been freed from fear. . . ."

"And so now you're going to..." Zhovtyak nodded at the revolver, the words sticking in his throat. "Now you're going to..."

"Obviously," Postnikov said very simply. "I ought to have done it long ago, but I never had an opportunity as good as this, or a revolver, for that matter. I couldn't do it with my bare hands, could I? Nor could I do it with a kitchen knife, the way they slaughter pigs, because that needs skill. But as for exterminating your breed of vermin why, it's just social hygiene. So they'd never try it again!"

"Try what? I don't... quite understand."

"Everything! Commit treason... Misappropriate the endeavour of others... climb to the top by foul means... All these things are links in a chain, you know. A self-seeker is capable of anything, he knows no moral barriers. Haven't you betrayed your country?"

"But I'm not a soldier! I never took the oath! I'm a civilian, a private individual who..."

"Private individual who..." Postnikov repeated, a smile curling his lips. "How disgusting, o Lord, how disgusting!"

He looked at the gun in his hand with something like dismay, and then Zhovtyak knew that he, too, was frightened.

"Ivan Dmitriyevich! Mr. Postnikov!" he cried, his blood running cold. "I beg you! I implore you! I'll do everything..."

Postnikov took a gulp of brandy.

"Unfortunately, I was not able to get in touch with anyone, you see," he said simply and sadly. "I tried to establish some sort of contact with the underground, but I'm like a leper to them, they fight shy of me because they believe that I'm one of you! And once, when I lost control and said something to the effect that the swine would one day wipe their tears with sandpaper, the way they themselves sing it, everyone stopped talking at once because they suspected me of being a provocateur or an informer of yours..."

An expression of vehement anguish filled his icy, milk-blue eyes.

"Ah, how truly delightful killing you will be!" he said with a sigh of relief.

"But what will you gain by it?" Zhovtyak asked in a tense hiss, too frightened to stir. "The Germans will hang you, you know."

"Oh, I won't tell them I killed you," Postnikov replied seriously. "I won't tell anyone. And since they won't know they won't hang me."

"They know already!" Zhovtyak said warily. "I've warned them that if anyone were to kill me here that someone would be you."

Postnikov slowly raised his eyes to Zhovtyak's face: in those short minutes it had grown so livid, the features were so distorted, that it already looked like the face of a corpse. This was no longer the haughty and snobbish Professor Zhovtyak, it was simply someone who was about to die, and die a dog's death at that. It was already "the late Zhovtyak."

"It's a lie," Postnikov said in a bored voice. "It's a lie like everything else in your life. You were a liar always..."

"Look, would you like me to give you all my treasures?" Zhovtyak offered impulsively, his fleshy body jerking forward on its short legs. "Would you? I'm a rich man, I'm very rich, I've lots of everything, so much, in fact, that I couldn't even evacuate my collections. Actually, it's this that restricted my movements, so to speak, I mean about leaving town. Listen to me, Ivan Dmitriyevich! I've some paintings by old masters, canvases of enormous value, beautiful cutglass, and porcelain, the rarest of china..."

Postnikov was not listening.

"When is the operation scheduled for?" he asked. "When will the massacre begin?"

Zhovtyak answered readily, even taking a little step forward.

"Tonight! The operation is called Night and Fog XXI. The name's traditional, it's a sort of style of theirs, don't you see. A 'cloak and dagger' sort of thing. Our oncological institute comes first, after that the mental hospital, and so on down the list. All the hospitals, and, naturally, all the Jews are on that list. It's to be done in special vans..." He outlined the shape of those vans in the air with both hands.

"And it was with you personally they coordinated all this?" Postnikov asked courteously. "These and other details?"

"Ivan Dmitriyevich, you've got to try and understand me, after all," Zhovtyak said confidently, suddenly thinking that there was still hope. "In conditions of tyranny, the only way to actively resist the invaders is to feign loyalty and pretend that you are completely on their side. It's sheer stupidity to come out openly against their established order. Oh yes, I have

thought a lot about it, I have reflected and pondered. All right, I'll stick out my neck deliberately, or more romantically—I shall wear a crown of thorns. And what then? My martyrdom will be lost in the Lethe, because my very name will be unmentionable. And so why should I . . .”

“You haven’t answered my question,” Postnikov interrupted the flow. “I’m not interested in your reasons. I ask you: did they agree on all the details of this so-called operation with you?”

“Oh, certainly! Naturally they had to. What I mean to say is, I’ve simply been informed, of course, because I only act as a consultant, so to speak. . . .”

“Consultant!” Postnikov repeated mechanically in a faraway voice; he held his left hand pressed to his temple, palm inward, and in his right he had the revolver, pointed at the floor. “And there wasn’t anything you could do? Couldn’t you at least have let me know at once? We might have . . . we might have saved a few lives at least, we might have taken people out, sneaked them out, hidden them. . . . We might have . . . what about Ganichev? You knew that I had operated on him, that I had incised his stomach, you knew that there was no metastasis, and now, Ganichev is to go into a gas chamber, he is to be poisoned, murdered! Yes? Ganichev is a scholar, none of us can hold a candle to him, he’s. . . .”

“He refused to co-operate!” Zhovtyak said, shaking his finger in admonition. “It would be asking too much of me! After all, I can’t risk my position for every. . . .”

Postnikov’s lean, greenish face twitched. He seemed to be making a supreme effort to speak.

“How shall I do it? In the name of what? In the name of surgery, perhaps?” And suddenly he raised the revolver.

“No!” screamed Zhovtyak. “No, no! I implore you. . . .”

Postnikov fired sitting down and Zhovtyak fell, hitting his head against the sideboard, never to stir again. Postnikov got up, went to the writing desk, took a piece of Zhovtyak’s personal stationery headed with all his degrees and titles, stood thinking for a moment, and then wrote in big letters: “Death to the German Occupants”. He placed the note on the corpse, and, taking the revolver with him, remained a long time in the hall, buttoning up his old, shabby overcoat.

The night was dark, without moon or stars, and a frosty mist hung over the black ruins of the town, when Dr. Postnikov

started on his way to the oncological hospital. He held a whispered conversation with himself. There was nothing he could do now to help the bedridden and convalescent patients, but still his mind worked feverishly, tormentingly, seeking a way out. He knew that Ganichev would get well, he was quite sure that the operation had been a success, and the thought that this scholar whom he had returned to life, was to be murdered so brutally, stabbed at his very soul with a pain that was past bearing. Ganichev, and all the others, the entire hospital, all the wards, all the beds. . . .

"Night and Fog," he was thinking, "Night and Fog, and no way out!"

"Supposing I take Ganichev to my place right now?" he asked himself when he came in sight of the institute, but he knew at once that he could not do it, because there was a steel-helmeted German soldier with a submachine-gun stationed at the front door.

The sentry stopped him with a shout, swung his submachine-gun onto his arm, looked at Postnikov's pass, signed by Zhovtyak, played his flashlight on his face, comparing it with the one in the photo, and then nodded his permission to enter.

In the dim unheated vestibule, lit with a single bulb, Postnikov took off his overcoat, got into his white doctor's coat, that had become yellow and spotty, and marvelling, as he always did, that the institute still managed to survive, began to run lightly up the stairs to the second floor. His walking patients were warming themselves round the iron stove outside the operating room. Mortified by their rising to greet him and the affectionate respect in their greetings given only to the really dedicated doctors, he nodded in passing, and went into Ward 17, a small and very cold room where Ganichev looking like an emaciated Buddah with his enigmatic smile, lay reading his favourite book, Erasmus's *A Eulogy to Folly*, in the feeble light of a Christmas tree candle.

"D'you know what I've been thinking?" he asked in a low but already strong voice, just as if he were picking up the threads of an interrupted conversation. "It's amazing how right Pirogov was in asserting that all that is new in the world is, in fact, old, only it's been well forgotten. Vileness and cruelty are not new. . . ."

Postnikov sat down, stretching out his long, tired legs, and thought grimly that in a couple of hours this powerful intellect, which always afforded him such pleasure, would cease to exist,

and that the battle for the life of this wonderful scholar, which he had fought against such odds and won, was an empty triumph. . . .

"Isn't it amazing?" said Ganichev, developing the idea which Postnikov failed to grasp. "Isn't it true of the time we're living in? Just listen to this!"

Fluently translating it from the German, he read:

"War, that is so universally extolled, is waged by toadies, pimps, thieves, murderers, ignorant boors, hopeless debtors and other such dregs of society, and not by enlightened philosophers at all. . . ."

He beamed at Postnikov triumphantly.

"Do you find consolation in this?" Postnikov asked quietly.

"I certainly do! Erasmus, you know, was a German, and this is what he wrote, I'll translate it for you: 'Remember the snobbery of plangent titles and names. Remember the homage, due only to God, paid to nonentities, and the solemn rites defying the vilest tyrants.'"

"I've just killed Zhovtyak," Postnikov uttered the words involuntarily. "Not more than an hour ago."

And without knowing why he did it he showed him Zhovtyak's heavy revolver.

Ganichev put down his book on the pile of rags heaped on top of his blanket, shivered as from cold, sighed, and asked: "Yourself?"

"Yes. I shot him. With these hands."

"To think of it," Ganichev said, smiling enigmatically. "With these hands that have done so much good. So many years of good. . . ."

"But is my killing Zhovtyak evil?" Postnikov asked very low, piercing Ganichev with his icy-blue gaze. "Do you still persist in being a moral vegetarian? I killed him for your and my sins too, by the way. The years we knew that he was a scoundrel and put up with it. And I served him loyally, besides. Remember how Polunin used to quarrel with us about Zhovtyak, but we too—I from fear, and you from moral inertness—never moved a finger to get rid of the swine. . . ."

"You either speak well of the dead or not at all," Ganichev said, still smiling. "Isn't that right?"

"You either speak the truth of the dead or nothing at all," Postnikov objected. "So that young man was right. Remember Ustimenko? Remember his fierce resoluteness? Remember, how

he could not understand this common inertness of ours? And it was precisely our inactivity, our criminal inertness that fostered Zhovtyak the traitor. By the way, he sold Ogurtsov to the Gestapo today, remember him? Ustimenko's friend, a youth who always doubted everything? You don't? He had teeth with spaces between them. Remember now?"

"What else happened today?" Ganichev asked, looking searchingly and sharply into Postnikov's tortured bony face. "Plenty must have happened, otherwise you wouldn't have killed him. You wouldn't have mustered the strength to kill him. I mean. It's anything but simple, I imagine. Well then: what happened?"

"Many things," said Postnikov. "I'll tell you in a minute. But besides everything else, d'you know what I thought just before *the* moment?... I thought: another reason for exterminating you, Zhovtyak, is to prevent some smart aleck from saying later on that 'there *are* professors who'.... 'No. There *are no* professors like that!' Humanity will answer him. 'There can't be, because "professor" is not only a concept of rank and science, but also a concept of morality....'"

"How you do run on!" Ganichev smiled. "You might be twenty. Now tell me what happened."

Postnikov did not answer at once, and it was obvious to Ganichev that he was getting up his courage to speak.

"They're going to finish off all the patients in all the hospitals tonight," he brought out slowly but very firmly, and his already pale face turned even paler. "All our patients in all our hospitals. They call this mass slaughter Operation Night and Fog. Zhovtyak knew they were planning the crime, and concealed the fact from us...."

Ganichev closed his eyes.

"This will teach us, a bit too late in the day, to be tolerant towards scoundrels," he said at last. "And to indulge in moral indolence. And because we let him get away with it and were too inert to act, we'll now have soap made out of us."

"Soap?"

"Of course. They let nothing go to waste, I understand. I'm glad I've no gold crowns on my teeth. They wrench them out and send them to the Reichsbank. God damn them for it. But what about us? Is it gas chambers, or what?"

For answer Postnikov got a tiny box out of his breast pocket: inside lay a pearly ampule in cotton wool. He held it up to

the light—the meagre light of the pink Christmas tree candle—and then handed it to Ganichev.

“What about yourself? Have you any more?” Ganichev asked, guessing what the ampule contained.

“I have a gun,” Postnikov replied. “The charge is eight bullets. One I used on Zhovtyak, with six I’ll try to hit six nazis, and one. . . .”

“Yes, but . . . supposing. . . .”

“They’ll kill me most probably,” Postnikov said coolly. “Right there, on the spot.”

“In that case—thanks.”

Ganichev also held up the ampule to the light.

“They’ve become expert at making this stuff, if nothing else,” said Postnikov. “Judging from their literature, they’re staging a series of experiments on people there. It’s vague, but I understand. . . .”

He badly wanted to smoke. Ganichev divining his thoughts, took a pouch with some shredded home-grown tobacco and some German cigarette paper out of his locker. Postnikov rolled himself a cigarette and inhaled deeply.

“Leonid Andreyev, the writer, has a psychological story called ‘Once Upon a Time’. It’s about a hospital and patients. . . .”

“Oh yes, I know it well. An excellent story,” Ganichev said, twisting the ampule in his fingers. “I wonder, will anyone ever write about us? About hours such as these I mean, about the stupid mistakes we made and how we corrected them, about young Ogurtsov who’s been taken away and who will tell them nothing, of course. . . .”

“Don’t worry, they will write about it and publish books about it, but I’m afraid the books will not be best sellers,” Postnikov said with an angry chuckle. “I’m not blaming the readers for wanting to relax with a book—I’m like that myself. You get tired, and you want some restful reading after work, a moving story about young Jessie, ill with TB but pure of heart, loving her John, strong but meek and industrious, on the seashore. Why trouble your peace of mind, reading? I can just see one of those young cows sprawling on a couch or sitting on a love seat,” he spat the word out with loathing, “sprawling there and sucking sweets—there are such readers, you know, who like sweetmeats to go with a book—I can just see one of those young cows eating cake, reading, and suddenly exclaiming in a petulant sort of whimper: ‘Mummy, or Yuri or Nona

or whoever it may be, it's too awful reading about such things, too, too awful!' See what I mean? It'll be too awful to read, sprawling on that love seat. . . ."

"What then?" Ganichev asked curiously, still playing with his ampule. "What next, the way you see it?"

"There's nothing next, everything's all right, everything is fine. They throw down the book and betake themselves to the theatre to see an operetta entitled *Moonlight and Sarsaw* complete with cancan, pas de quatre, and jolly ditties. And they'll say: 'This is where we can really relax!' And in the meantime some new Adolf will be getting ready for a new war, and he will be the one to preach everything that's light, that's no strain on the intellect, that's not a burden to anyone. No wonder the Führer himself adores the lightest of genres, and no wonder the world amused itself so hysterically and was distracted so deliberately all the prewar years. . . ."

"I'm all for light genres myself, by the way. Can't stand morbid stuff," Ganichev said. "So I think you're exaggerating this terribly. It would be a good thing, of course, if the moral of this story was not lost on the flippant human race. By the way, what is the time?"

"Eleven," Postnikov replied after a pause.

"Oh-oh!" Ganichev exclaimed, as if afraid he would be late somewhere. "All right, leave me now, I'll manage by myself. Do me a favour, tell my widow. . . ."

"I shan't be able to," Postnikov said, getting up. "Besides, there's no need really. . . ."

Clenching his teeth hard, he offered Ganichev his hand. Changing the ampule into his left hand, Ganichev responded to the handshake calmly, putting no meaning into it at all, and only his smile became uncertain and shaky.

"Do you know something else?" he asked suddenly. "Do you? I once asserted that contempt was hatred in a state of tranquillity. What a horrible fallacy this state of tranquillity idea is altogether, don't you think?"

"Ustimenko, that tousled young chap, was always yelling: 'Eternal battle, tranquillity is but a dream'—remember?" Postnikov said with a faint, melancholy smile.

"I remember something like that," Ganichev said.

And waving to Postnikov who was already in the doorway he said, as if it were a password: "Eternal battle?"

"Good-bye," Postnikov said.

"Good-bye, Ivan Dmitriyevich."

Postnikov went out into the corridor, twisted the tips of his moustache with shaking fingers, stopped a ward nurse and told her sternly that Professor Ganichev had fallen asleep at last and was not to be disturbed. Then he went downstairs, locked and bolted the frost-covered front door, told the doorman not to open it to anyone without asking him first, and returned to the iron stove, round which his patients were whiling away the dreary hours. They offered him a low stool beside Zhenya Ladyzhnikov, a freckled, button-nosed boy who had sarcoma of the shoulder, a boy for whose life Postnikov had waged such a long and seemingly hopeless battle, and who would be just another dead body in an hour from now.

"Is there any news about our people?" the boy whispered.

"What people? What our people do you mean?" Postnikov countered with his habitual fear of provocation. And suddenly he realised that neither he nor any of them had anything more to fear. "Oh, you mean the Red Army? Sure, there's news," he said, picking up a smoldering coal to relight his cigarette. "There's plenty of news about it, a lot gets through for all their restrictions. The Germans broke their teeth in their attempt to seize Moscow. And consequently their lightning war has proved a failure, it's a crashing blow to them, their first, because they got used to having things their way. Many of our towns have already been liberated, too. The supreme command is undoubtedly planning a counter-offensive. The tank units are getting ready to strike, and many others are in battle trim already. Our air fleets will deal the German armies a shattering blow before long. Things are not too pleasant for them here either. Zhovtyak, the Bürgermeister, was killed today. . . ."

"Who killed him, who?" Zhenya cried out eagerly.

"The people's avengers, who else?" someone said in a deep, gruff voice.

"Exactly," Postnikov nodded. "Oh no, it's not all plain sailing for the fascists! Air-borne troops of enormous size, commanded by officers of merit and talent, are being formed in Siberia, in the Urals, and in many other regions, kept secret of course. These troops will deal a blow of unheard-of force at Germany, her rear, her military communications, and the headquarters of Hitler himself. . . ."

He talked on and on to these tortured, suffering, hungry and cold people, and now patients came straggling in from the

wards—some on crutches, one was wheeled in on a trolley and one other carried in a chair—all those who were able to move at all now gathered round their grey-haired doctor, who was so reticent as a rule, and furtively brushing away a tear listened to his beautiful, inspired lying, which convinced them all that the great day of victory was near, it was there just round the corner, it would come tomorrow or maybe the day after...

"That's how it is." He ended abruptly. "Do you understand everything now?"

Treading softly, as if he were really afraid to disturb Gani-chev's sleep, he walked up to his bed, touched his wrist, closed his eyes, and straightened the rags piled on top of the blanket. But the next instant he flung them away into a corner: he was dead now, so hot or cold made no difference to him.

He found the patients still huddled round the stove, talking quietly. From force of habit he told them sternly: "Get back to bed at once!" and, glancing worriedly at his wrist watch, went down to the vestibule.

It was a few seconds to twelve, and he could already hear the vans drawing up outside. To get the nurse on duty out of the way, he told her to bring him a cup of hot tea. When the Germans started banging on the front door, he gripped his gun in his right hand and with his left turned the key and shot back the bolt.

Expecting an officer to walk in first, he fired almost without aiming and killed a soldier, whereupon they rushed in in a body, firing their submachine-guns into the semi-darkness of the vestibule, merely wounding and not killing Postnikov. Ducking, he squatted in front of the counter behind which were the coat racks, and sent two more bullets home. And only then, after losing three men from their Sonderkommando, the Germans saw Postnikov, and began to advance on him altogether, firing until they realised that he must have long been dead and they were merely riddling a corpse with their bullets.

And then, Obersturmführer Zollinger, the "good kid", wearing his short smart fur-lined coat and tall-crowned cap, walked in briskly, aimed a kick at Postnikov's grey head, and ordered in his high-pitched voice.

"Deliver him to the Gestapo morgue. We'll find out later who he is!"

Being a Patient Is Such a Bore!

Dear Aunt,

Everyone in my ward is writing letters, so I decided to write you again though you never answer me. But maybe you have more trouble with mailing letters where you are than we have here. And so I'll forgive you. I also forgive all those others who don't write to me. I'm ever so much kinder now than I used to be, you'll note.

With all this time on my hands, I made a sort of review of myself, and the result was not very heartening. You've got a pretty nasty chap for a nephew, I must tell you. He's conceited and presumptuous, forever criticising others and putting on airs. "A light to others I'll burn myself out!" How touching! How were you able to stand me? And I used to reject everything too! Who wants literature, what's the good of the theatre, what's the good of paintings?

A whipping is what such kids need, that's for sure.

They want to be whipped mercilessly, so they won't get conceited and stuck-up, a pain in the neck to other people because they think they're so damned special.

I was forever preaching and teaching someone. Now that I'm lying in bed here and remembering things, it actually makes me sick, would you believe it? And I've regrets, too. I'm sorry I didn't play football, didn't stroll arm in arm with Varya up and down the bank of our Uncha on summer nights with all the other couples. I'm sorry I never read Tolstoi's *War and Peace* properly, and now there's a mile-long waiting list for it at the hospital library. . . .

But I did get the book, and do you know who brought it?

Bogoslovsky. Remember him? He sent you his best regards.

He's an army surgeon, a captain, he was appointed chief surgeon of the front a short while ago. But he's already had a row with someone, and is no longer the chief surgeon. He chuckles about it slyly. He's grown rather thin, rather old, and he limps. It happened in August. He was in the midst of an operation when a bomb exploded nearby; his theatre nurse flopped neatly on her back, holding her sterile hands out in front of her, but Bogoslovsky did not fall, he kept his feet because he was operating on the heart, you see. A splinter landed in his shin, and the flustered nurse put a tourniquet on the wrong leg. He finished the operation, and only then saw to his own wound

The man he operated on is alive and kicking. The rest, he says, is inessential.

He's terribly worried about his wife and daughter: they are in occupied territory, and that's all he knows about them. When he talks about them it hurts to look at him. You're so clever, auntie, can you see a way of helping them? His wife is so impractical, he says, there's no one in the world to beat her at that.

Give it a thought, will you.

"She's a good doctor too, an excellent one, you can trust my judgment. Of course, gynecology and midwifery are not very much in demand just now, but Bogoslovsky says she's a "bold, serious surgeon." He's not the sort to sing empty praises even of his own wife.

He and I talked about Polunin, and recalled how disgracefully drunk I got at Postnikov's pelmeni party, remember? It made me feel I wasn't so very young, you know. We also recalled our famous Professor Zhovtyak, the Assyrian beard he wore, and the regal entrance he always made with his retinue. I wonder what's happened to him and Postnikov. It's a pity there's no tracing him. Bogoslovsky insists, rather irritably too, that war-time is the very time for Postnikov's talent to unfold as never before. He also insists that as a surgeon Postnikov has been grossly underestimated, however, that's Bogoslovsky all over, as soon as the conversation turns to professors and plain doctors. Maybe he is right, though.

He told me a very interesting story: Fleming, a British bacteriologist, discovered as long ago as 1928 that mould the spores of which flew accidentally in through the window of his lab at a London hospital and germinated on agar-agar, had the amazing, unprecedented ability to kill all the germs around it. He approached the powers that be with his discovery, the lights of the medical world, the principal and the most esteemed ones. But he got nowhere. And one of the reasons, according to Bogoslovsky, was that Bayer, the famous German firm, had just inundated the market with its new drugs which, the Germans said, were capable of killing any germs. And only when the Germans began to drop their bombs on England did the representatives of lofty and pure science seek out Fleming and his mould. Imagine, auntie, he'd been patiently waiting for his day! And what a day! The mould proved even more potent than Fleming himself imagined. This new medicine is called penicillin.

The scientists who do the deciding have now given Fleming's work their approval.

Still, there's a lapse of thirteen years between 1928 and now. Who's to pay for the deaths that need not have occurred if Fleming had found support for his great discovery at the time?

A jolly tale, don't you think?

Auntie, please don't be mad at me for trying to be too clever, as you used to say in that peaceful long-ago of ours. I have too much time on my hands, and I can't order my thoughts to stop bothering me. They don't let me sleep. I lie in bed, thinking and thinking. . . .

You're displeased with me, most probably, for brooding on such civilian things with a war like this going on, but you see all those profit-making practices, all that departmentalism, all that worshipping of rank in science, are costing mankind dearly in the tragic periods of war. Bogoslovsky remembers reading a thought, voiced by some wise man, which goes something like this: "many great discoveries and inventions are made by non-specialists, and this is not accidental. Non-specialists are free in the highest sense of the word because they are not concerned with the conventions of official science, they are not bound by any canons, nor do they belong to a set in which canons are a sort of taboo." This explains why Kovalevsky, a lawyer, opened a new era in paleontology, why Pasteur, a chemist, brought changes into the fundamentals of medicine just as did Mechnikov, a zoologist; why Herschel, a musician, discovered the planet Uranus, and Fulton, a jeweller, designed the first steamboat. These examples can be multiplied many times over. Bogoslovsky is convinced, for instance, that the strongest and main fighters against malignant tumours will be not surgeons but biochemists, chemists and biophysicists. The surgeon's knife is outliving itself. A surgeon must not merely strive to perfect his technique, he must also seek ways to make his technique redundant altogether. . . .

See what a lot of everything I've written you!

Don't let it get you down! You know very well that as soon as they discharge me from here and I get back to work I'll write less often and more briefly.

Regard this as a down payment, so to speak.

Where is Yevgeny Stepanov, do you know? You might at least let me have his address.

Hasn't Ginger written you at all?

I have no personal news. Misha Shervud has been to see me again. I think he belongs to that rather numerous breed who can't stand having enemies. And not because they're so kind-hearted, but simply because it's inconvenient. It's much better to be on moderately good terms with everyone, they think, than making even one enemy. That's why scoundrels manage to get along happily enough. Not that Misha is a scoundrel, but he would not quarrel with one.

He came in, sat down, and started talking about art—a neutral subject. He discourses on art with his usual easy familiarity. A motion picture he calls a reel, and never says if he liked it or not. He's careful not to commit himself. Instead he says: "This reel was made by a master" or "That reel shows a want of making". When I hear this kind of blah-blah on a subject I don't understand, I feel sick. But it would be a bore to object or quarrel with him. Misha left feeling well pleased with himself.

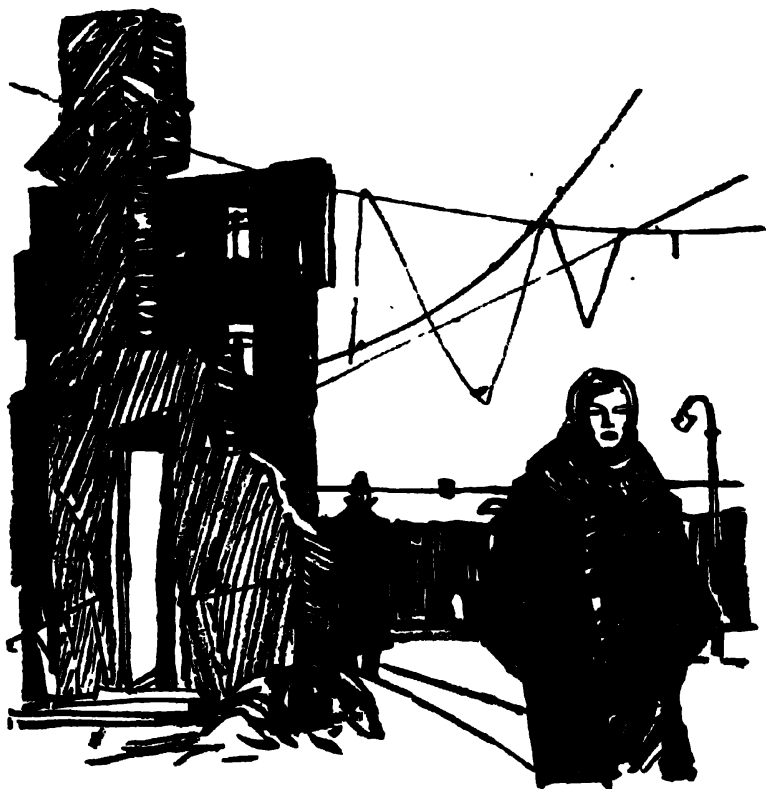
How do you like the news from the front lines?

So the fascists are beatable, after all! It's the most important thing that had to be proved at the given stage. And here am I, an able-bodied man lolling in a hospital bed, so snug and safe, and not threatened by so much as a draught coming in at the door. My roommates tell me I use bad language in my sleep. It's because of being kept here so long. But I'm hoping to get out soon: I've worked out a plan of action. In the meantime I'm having the latest achievements of medical science inflicted upon me. It's practice what you preach with a vengeance, I can tell you. The doctors make diagnoses that don't tally and quarrel with each other. Doctors should fall ill more often, it puts sense into their heads. It's mean, but quite true. Otherwise everything seems amazingly simple.

Keep well and don't worry, my darling aunt. And do write me a letter. This long silence of yours is not like you at all.

Vladimir.

P. S. Don't forget about Bogoslovsky's family, please auntie.



Chapter 6

Short Leash

The cigar would not draw, and the Egyptian cigarette from Rommel's personal gift parcel was tasteless. And the excellent Mocha smelt of damp sawdust.

"I suppose I'll just die here in this frozen town among the ruins, ashes and rubble," ran von Zanke's melancholy thoughts. "And my old friends, reading the obituary in the newspaper, will say: poor old von Zanke, he never lived to be a Brigadenführer. . . ."

He felt very sorry for himself and his roses, which he loved so tenderly and so devotedly, and among which he could spend

whole days pondering ways of restoring Germany's greatness and uprooting the lowly feeling of compassion from the hearts of the German people, or else devising a plan of the most efficacious and simple extermination of the "subhuman" population on territory conquered by the German genius. . . .

Sometimes he crooned a song over the lovely Charles Mallerin rose, or the darling Brennende Liebe, or the proud and haughty Mrs. Henry Morse, which through hatred for everything Anglo-Saxon he had renamed Brunhilde without a qualm. Humming a tune as he potted in his garden, with the waters of old man Rhine slowly rolling below, the Standartenführer in his short, neat gardening apron, detachable cuffs tied with pretty bows and a carelessly knotted scarf, looked like an old flutist from a symphony orchestra. Oh, how terribly deceptive a person's appearance is sometimes, how terrible the so-called limpid eyes, the gentlest and the kindest can be, and how truly beautiful a heart one sometimes discovers behind an ugly countenance, and what an unattainable loftiness and purity of thought. . . .

The nice flutist, adorer of roses, penned highly confidential reports to his Führer in a clear, round hand on "matters not to be divulged", and it happened on more than one occasion that Hitler, waving the neat gold-edged sheets in front of someone's nose—be it Himmler himself, or Heydrich or Rosenberg, demanded in his vulgar screech: "Are you aware of this? And this? Have you worked on these problems?"

All went well until the invasion of Russia. And even there at first von Zanke was vested with enormous authority. But the points and paragraphs which looked so reasonable on paper proved useless when applied in this very strange country. And Himmler, Heydrich and Rosenberg began to settle accounts with the old flutist. Every train derailed by the partisans was debited to von Zanke's personal account. His every report brought back a killing coded message, and twice now the oak leaves to his cross had passed him by, although he definitely knew that the order had been made out and taken in for signature.

And now there was this mysterious murder of the Bürgermeister, and the strange case of that Dr. Postnikov who, although vouched for by the Bürgermeister, had fired at the soldiers of the Sonderkommando, killing three of the boys. . . .

Maybe he could pin the entire blame on the commandant of the town, that upstart zu Stakkeberg und Waldeck?

But blame for what, exactly?

Zhovtyak, the commandant's protégé, had not run to the partisans, he was murdered at home, in his own flat.

By whom?

Holding the hot-water bottle to his stomach (this old remedy best relieved the discomfort), he went to the window, scraped at the frost-encrusted glass with a fingernail, and took a look at Ogurtsov, hanging from the gallows. An idiotic hanging, this! The man, crazed by torture, had spat on Hitler's portrait and they had strung him up without getting any information out of him. But he'd just like to see them not stringing him up! Zollinger, would have reported them right away, using his right of "Gestapo within the Gestapo", and informed his superiors that in Group "C" the Führer's portrait could be spat upon with impunity!

It was a bleak day, the wind swept the dry snow along the ground in the court below, and swung Ogurtsov's body back and forth. What a magnificent achievement of the investigating department of Group "C", headed by the highly experienced Standartenführer von Zanke! The greatest of victories over the Red partisans! Sleep soundly, everyone! The partisan movement in all regions controlled by Group "C" and its commander has been completely wiped out!

"Must you smoke in my room?" he screamed, suddenly losing control entirely. "Can't you see the state I'm in? I'm not a youth, after all, I'll be sixty next birthday!"

He did not mean to scream. It really sounded like the plaintive wail of a sick old man whose ailments were getting the better of him. No, no, this would never do.

He changed to a jocular tone: "Did I frighten you? I'm worried about your health, my boys. You can't burn the candle at both ends. You have tiring work, you don't get enough sleep, and on top of that you're poisoning yourselves with nicotine! I'd rather die myself than lose one of you. Why?"

"He's off on his idiotic whys again," Wenzlow thought, sighing. Zollinger gave him a wink as much as to say: "The stupid old ass!" The "good kid" was not looking his best, and the sticking plaster on his cheek was anything but becoming. He said that he had run into a nail in the door of his room, but Wenzlow had heard that during the Night and Fog operation one of the victims had jumped on him at the last moment and all but strangled him.

"Because," von Zanke continued. "Because every one of you contains a particle of my experience, my theories and the ideas born here!" He gently touched his forehead with the palm of his hand as if afraid to spill out its treasures.

"You are my immortality! You are the continuation of my mortal self in the immortal spirit of our pure race. The purity of our race..." Wenzlow listened, swallowing a yawn.

The chief was away on one of his interminable, nonsensical and dearly beloved discourses on the selection of the purest of pure Aryans, and in his boredom Wenzlow suddenly remembered reading in some anti-nazi emigrant paper that the nazis' concern for the purity of the race was, in fact, a religion of animals who had learnt to understand the reasoning of animal breeders. It struck him as so terribly funny, he wanted to giggle and actually began to shake with laughter, but he pretended it was a shiver and began listening with an anxious frown. In his nagging voice the chief was speaking about the Germans of Frizland who provided the sires for the pure German race. Zollinger wore a self-satisfied smile—he came from Frizland. "The old ass is currying favour with him," Wenzlow thought. "Things must be pretty bad if we're wasting time on that young whelp."

Next, Zollinger reported on the Ogurtsov case. According to him the words: "Just let them try" as well as many other anti-nazi statements really belonged to that criminal. As far as the hanging itself was concerned, he was already dead when they hanged him. The sacrilege—meaning the spitting—had been too much for Zollinger. He had lost control and was prepared to take his punishment, his nerves gave way and he killed the dirty villain, firing point-blank twice. He was guilty, of course, but begged clemency in consideration of the fact that the incident occurred immediately after the operation Night and Fog, which had been something of a strain. . . .

He also reported on the valuables confiscated during the operation Night and Fog: so many watches, cigarette cases, rings, chains and gold tooth caps (in grams). When he was through, he made a slight bow and sat down.

The chief inclined his head in gratitude.

"Your services in carrying out the operation Night and Fog must certainly be duly rewarded," he said. "I shall see to it myself. The above-mentioned two thousand six hundred grams of gold, removed from the mouths of those who will have no

further use for it, will be sent by Frau Miesel (he glanced at Dog's Death who got up and sat down again) to the Reichsbank in Berlin—she knows the routine well. A good watch with an inscription will be presented to every soldier of the Sonderkommando—that's the rule. Valuable collections of stamps, coins and banknotes will be raffled, according to our good old tradition, among the officers of Group "C". Our officers will also choose for themselves such of the trinkets as are deserving of the attention of their dear ones at home, in our Fatherland. The remainder, properly catalogued and registered, will be sent to the Reichsbank by Frau Miesel (Dog's Death got up again)—she knows the deposit account. And now, here are some of my considerations regarding the case of the Red partisan Ogurtsov, executed in accordance with a matriculus signed by me..." The chief invariably called the death sentences matricula.

Zollinger's pretty, doll-like face expressed attention. "I've got the chief where I want him," he was thinking. "Even if he does voice some doubt now, I don't give a damn. 'Executed according to matriculus' means that everything is O.K."

Wenzlow yawned again, screening his mouth with his hand. It went without saying that all threads had been broken with this foolish killing of Ogurtsov. There was no hope now of getting at any of the partisans or averting sabotage. Everything hinged on that man Postnikov. He had undoubtedly been planted there by the Reds and put in command. But unfortunately he was dead. The chief was right, of course: not all those methods of physical coercion, so facilely elaborated in Berlin at the Gestapo in Prinz-Albrecht-Allee, were applicable here. Torture got you nowhere. Experience had proved this and one other remarkable feature of the Russians: only the innocent confessed under torture, and the weak ones only to be tortured no longer. The strong ones died, either in silence or cursing.

"And so," said von Zanke, taking a fresh hot-water bottle from Dr. Schäffer and pushing it inside his unbuttoned trousers. "And so, my boys, we must use more subtlety in our work. But how?"

All of them, assembled in the chief's office, listened to him tensely and alertly. They were: Wenzlow, Zollinger, the dullard Schrank, the profusely sweating Krolle, Obersturmführer Koditsky, and the fat-faced Brunck, a lieutenant of the SS whose insignia on the too tall collar of his jacket always flashed like the lightning it represented. Then there was Rupp, the morphine

addict, Hans Ker—the sleekest and smartest man in the group who wrote pornographic verses about “the will and strength of Aryan seed”, the Spaniard Francisco Largo Checa, Nursen, a quisling, Count D’Aosta who was a happy-go-lucky duffer from Genoa appointed to the group to avoid active service thanks to his mother’s old connection with Heydrich; Dimitrescu, a Rumanian, who had taken the “Vostok” concise course in Königsberg under von Zanke; Sonne, Stier and von Botzow, who were criminal investigators with no military rank; and the tiny young lieutenant Hugo Weichald, popularly known as Midget.

It was, indeed, essential that they should use more subtlety in their work, but how? All right, tell us if you know, you old moth-eaten parrot, jaundiced from doubts but still posing as a sage! Don’t hold out on us, since you know all the answers! Teach us all the tricks. What do you care, you old barn owl, you’ll simply be sent packing, back to your blessed rose garden, but what about us, your boys? Reichsleiter Göring is nobody’s fool, his inimitably laconic resolutions have been read out to Gestapo men often enough: “The entire Group ‘Z’ to be demoted for unqualified inactivity and despatched to the Eastern front with the first echelon of shock-troops.” You’re in no danger, a dotard like you, but what about your “boys”? We’ve long grown out of the Hitlerjugend age with its rosy dreams of the Reich armies slicing into the vastness of Russia as easily as a knife slices into butter. Everyone here knows how “easy” it is to come by Russia’s riches. . . .

“In spite of the fact that in the matter of identifying the Communist Ustimenko I met with complete failure,” von Zanke talked on. “I am convinced that she is not Fyodorova. She is the Communist Aglaya Ustimenko and none other. Her stubbornness and toughness, her inner sense of freedom and her confidence in her own strength, as well as the keyed-up energy of her inner resistance, give me the right to assert with full confidence that she is not Fyodorova but Ustimenko. The failure in the matter of identification I am inclined to put down to conspiracy and to the fact that the persons brought in to identify her were forewarned.”

“By whom?” asked Wenzlow.

“By persons unknown,” von Zanke said after a moment’s thought. “I have my conjectures, but so far they are no more than conjectures. If she were Fyodorova I would have finished with her already: she is of no importance to us, but in our haste

we let her see a bit more of our system than was wise. In the case of Ustimenko, it does not matter. We must trail her patiently and cautiously. And sooner or later she will lead us to where we must come. She won't stay in town forever. She's a high-ranking functionary and is obliged to act. And we, by following her tracks, will arrest the action aimed against us, we will not let it take place. And only then, when we have no further interest in her personally, we shall hang her."

"It's the short leash then?" Wenzlow asked jerkily.

"Yes. It's the only way."

"And what if we fail? Supposing she gets away?"

Wenzlow stood up. Red spots suddenly appeared on his cheeks. The officers of Group "C" sat up and took notice, certain that Wenzlow was about to give the old dodderer a piece of his mind. And he did.

"Parteigenosse von Zanke," he began as informally as if they were wearing their brown shirts and not their uniforms, and as if they were sitting in a München beer hall where debates and even shouting were permissible, and not here, in the depths of Russia. "Parteigenosse von Zanke, I do not share your optimistic view. I beg you to remember that Group "C", headed by Standartenführer von Zanke, has not solved a single worthwhile case. The situation is very tense; I shall permit myself to use an expression of the enemy and say: it's been made so hot for us that the earth is burning under our feet. But have we done anything to prevent the fire from spreading? Absolutely nothing! We read their leaflets and we know that a hectograph has been used, but we don't know by whom! We examine the site where an act of sabotage took place, and we shrug in dismay. We register cases of blasted trains, and stop at that! We look for culprits but we do not find them, and it is only hostages that we execute. This does not help us at all, it only sets the population against us more. . . ."

"Well, and what do you propose, my boy?" asked von Zanke, raising his eyebrows superciliously. "The negative side I know. Now I'm waiting to hear your constructive suggestions."

"Total annihilation!" Wenzlow said coldly. "The desert zone is an old and sound idea. Not just one hundred, two hundred or three hundred hostages, but complete extermination. Total!"

The chief smiled tenderly, picked up a pointer, and, holding up the hot-water bottle inside his trousers, shuffled to the map of the region pinned on the wall.

"My boys, my sweet little greenhorns, my darling hot-heads!" he said in the tone of a fond grandfather. "Take a good look at this, will you."

He pointed out to them, with quick, precise and angry movements, where the Reich armies were concentrated.

"The roads only!" he shouted shrilly. "The *Untermenschen*, the Russian enemy holds all that! Everything but the roads is in their hands!"

He traced circles, squares and triangles all over the map, drew lines along the railways, and marked several points.

"And we hold only this! But maybe one of you wishes to accuse me of softening?"

He turned dully gleaming eyes on them. And all the hardened killers suddenly felt like little lambs confronted by the wolf. It was only right that they should, of course, for cognition comes through comparison, as von Zanke said in conclusion of his speech.

"You snotty ignorant weaklings!" he shouted, knowing that the captain must fire first if a mutiny breaks out on his ship. "I am no Parteigenosse to you, Wenzlow. And stand up as a soldier of our glorious army should stand, and not as a dirty Jew in a synagogue! That's better, or else I'll order Specht to drill you a bit and he'll put you through your paces on the parade ground with a full combat load! Head up, Wenzlow! You're the fool who let the accountant go. It's your fault that they wouldn't identify her. You know you're to blame and yet you have the effrontery to talk! Sit down!"

He flung the pointer away. All the officers of Group "C" were petrified, their eyes never wavering from the chief's face. He took a cigarette out of his case, and several hands shot out holding lighters. But he preferred to use his own. The officers remembered the monogram on it: it was a present from Himmler.

"On the night of the Long Daggers," von Zanke resumed quietly, "when, as you probably know, an end was put to several thousand enemies of the new order and also to our own people who indulged in irrational thinking, I myself, with this hand here, reloading my Mauser again and again, my old trusty Mauser, delivered one hundred and seventeen former friends and comrades of mine from the misery of an earthly existence and despatched them to the Garden of Eden. Hesitation, therefore, of which you make bold to suspect me, is entirely alien to

my nature! But I am sober-minded always, and precisely because my head is cool, my ears hear and my eyes see. I am warning you that we are dealing with an enemy that knows no equal, and we have not the right to rest on our oars because of our armies' victories alone. The conquest of a town means more than leaving it behind, destroyed or even wiped out. To conquer a town you must *master* it, and what have we mastered so far? Do try to understand that it is the army's job to conquer a town and our to *master* it. The army has been coping with its task so far, and all we do is chatter and hang.... If you imagine that you are experienced men and know more about the punitive business than I do, you're sadly and profoundly mistaken. Cognition comes through comparison. The correlation of your experience to mine is one to a thousand. To every one of your matricula there is a good thousand of mine. Compare your pitiful ramblings about the usefulness of creating a desert zone and applying the method of total annihilation, to my fulfilled idea of setting up death factories for the subhumans. My fulfilled idea, mind you! And even if we are having a run of bad luck, even if we are dogged by ill fortune, all these adversities are temporary, as temporary as some of the single rebuffs suffered by our invincible armies led by our Führer's genius to the glorious goal of universal conquest. And now carry out my orders. Is everything clear?"

A subdued hubbub rose in the room. A hubbub of deferential approval.

"Very good," von Zanke nodded. "And now please give your attention to this recommendation from our good friend and mentor, Professor Klauberg, Chief Physician of the SS and Brigadenführer of the Medical Corps."

Putting on his gold-rimmed spectacles, he read out Prof. Klauberg's memorandum on the findings and conclusions arrived at by the scientific-research centre of the Medical Service of the SS approving the method of liquidating inferior elements by injecting 10 cc of pure phenol into the region of the heart.

"This method is economical," von Zanke read in a calm, matter-of-fact voice, "it can be carried out by any unskilled member of the medical staff. It produces no noise at all, and by virtue of its very character serves to protect the nervous system of the heavily overtaxed workers of the Gestapo, the SS and the SD and all others who, in their line of duty, are involved in the great purifying mission of our Reich."

When he had finished, he permitted himself to tease his friend, the Mother Rat, a bit.

"I suppose this will be work after your own heart, doctor? Quite a relief from your chief's ailments and his everlasting grumblings, eh? No one'll grumble after phenol, eh?"

He put his spectacles back in their case, and ordered the doctor crisply:

"Get your Bolshevik woman ready for discharge. We'll release her today. And we'll make Parteigenosse Wenzlow, our colleague, answerable for her behaviour on 'short leash'. Did you hear me, Wenzlow?"

The Closed World of My Soul

While her discharge papers were being made out, Aglaya wondered where she should go if they did release her, which she was still quite unable to believe, and how she could establish contact with the partisans without endangering whoever gave her asylum. She never doubted, of course, that she would be tailed by the Gestapo day and night, and that she was only being released temporarily so that when they did hang her it would not simply be a routine hanging but a "big case".

Ignoring the hand von Zanke offered her and merely inclining her small, proud head graciously, the "Bolshevik queen"—as he called her to himself with his sincere appreciation of elegance and poise in women—walked down the corridor to the exit. There suddenly she demonstrated her amazing self-control and presence of mind once again. Turning to von Zanke, who had already opened the door to go back into his office, she asked him when and where the suit length, she had in her possession when she was unlawfully arrested, would be returned to her.

A slow smile just touched Standartenführer von Zanke's lips. A slow, evil smile. Oh well, the moment would come when he would be delighted to remind this queenly hitch of the suit length returned to her in spite of the fact that they were convinced of her participation in crimes against the Reich armies. The Reich soldiers were no petty thieves, madame. There, there's your precious rag! I'll be glad to have a chat with you, madame, before they string you up. We are indeed finding it difficult, madame, in this cold and hostile country, but we are strong in

our Aryan spirit and shrewdness which will in the end destroy your simplicity; yes, madame, our shrewdness will destroy your simplicity together with your future, which you are so fond of talking about. . . .

But he did not say any of this. He merely gave the order curtly and imperiously, no longer pretending to be a nice old man, an honest old soldier with a heart of gold behind a rugged exterior. No, this woman would not be taken in by any of the variants of Gestapo high strategy. With characters like hers you had to use patience and wear down their resistance slowly. She would not be able to remain inactive long. And that was when the end would come not just to her physical self but to all that she was connected with and was even directing, perhaps. It was very, very likely that the "Bolshevik queen" was a figure of no little importance.

Frau Miesel, treading softly on her huge flat feet, took the Bolshevik woman to the storeroom where she handed her over to Lance-Corporal Krautz, who was in charge of confiscated property, and then, popping one of her favourite mints into her loose, wet mouth, repeated von Zanke's order to give the suit length back to the Russian.

But it was easier said than done.

And Krautz was in a fix.

The night Aglaya was taken to the sun porch—a place from which, Krautz knew, no person ever came back alive, a chance but perfectly reliable opportunity presented itself for him to send something home to Stettin, to his faithful Lissie, his "sweet, golden armful" as he called her in his hot, jealous letters, throbbing with desire, and signed with a flourish: "your Frizland bull". And since this infatuated Frizland bull found nothing worth sending on the storeroom shelves that cursed night, he made up a parcel which contained two gold watches, cleverly hidden, and the suit length belonging to this woman who, against all rules, had been released so unexpectedly by the chief himself.

True, Krautz knew all the ins and outs of the service and never stole anything indiscriminately. He replaced the things he took with something else: a simple enough transaction when the owners were dead. But this case was different. After all, he could not hand this flesh-and-blood corpse a piece of rotten German ersatz cloth to which the tag removed from her excellent serge had been pinned. Krautz played for time, wondering

what was the best thing to do. Aglaya, vaguely guessing what was wrong, decided in her quietly stubborn way to see the thing through to the end, and sighing patiently sat down on a stool beside the counter.

Krautz was busily sorting things out on his shelves, Dog's Death was loudly sucking her mints, and the Gestapo drivers were singing in the next room:

*What man's love is hotter, stronger
Than a soldier's home on leave?
If his leave were only longer
He would soon forget to grieve. . . .*

From the loudspeaker came the voice of the German announcer broadcasting for Russia: "The great Führer of the German people and Providence that guards over him deigned it imperative to invade Russia in order to conquer her before she could become an enemy. . . ."

Aglaya looked down and smiled: aren't you, fascists, stupid, it's amazing how stupid you are!

"Well, what's happened to my serge?" she asked. "Has it gone?"

The Frizland bull, Lance-Corporal Krautz, flung the ersatz cloth at her in exasperation, but she merely looked at it with narrowed eyes and said that there was obviously some mistake and she would ask him to get the matter straightened out right there and then or else call in Herr von Zanke. The old fox was just coming down the stairs on his way to lunch, dressed in a coffee-coloured short coat with a kangaroo fur collar, which he had turned up, and a woolly muffler, in which he snugly buried his chin. Hearing his name, he paused. Through the open door he saw the piece of ersatz cloth the Bolshevik woman was fingering. "Ah, what a character!" he thought almost admiringly. "If only I had one like her in my group!"

Foppishly swinging his cane, and dragging his foot a little, he came up closer, gallantly raised two fingers to the long visor of his cap, and assured Frau Fyodorova in broken Russian that Frau Miesel would immediately redeem to her the cost of her serge in marks, to the satisfaction of all concerned, he hoped.

Aglaya inclined her head.

Von Zanke flung his hand up to touch his cap again and went off to lunch at the Sweet Bavaria, his mouth watering at

the thought of the day when, contrary to custom, he would *personally* direct her hanging.

Dog's Death placed before Aglaya a batch of occupation marks, which everyone knew were printed at the same place in Berlin as kindergarten transfers, asked her to sign a receipt for it, took her to the door, and only after that rang up Zolinger requesting him to put the thieving Krautz under arrest.

In the square Aglaya stopped before the gallows. She had some difficulty in recognising Volodya's friend Ogurtsov and making out the words written on the square of plywood hung on his chest: "He collaborated with the Bolsheviks". She remembered the living Ogurtsov—his smile, which revealed teeth with spaces between, his dramatic ejaculations, his passionate doubts about the expediency of medical treatment, his sceptical attitude towards his own abilities—and then, tying the ends of her shawl tighter, she heaved a grief-laden sigh, and started on her way.

She knew where to go now.

Alevtina did not give her away that night, and so she was the person to go to. It was not easy, of course, but Aglaya well remembered hearing von Zanke entreat Alevtina in a sibilant whisper to take a closer look at her, reminding Alevtina that she was working for them and they trusted her, and saying that surely she must know the woman who had taken her husband away from her. Through the drugged sleep that enveloped her in soft waves Aglaya heard her repeating again and again: "No, no, it's not she. Wouldn't I know? Why, I'd bring her here myself with my own hands. . . ."

Alevtina could not have failed to recognise her. They had met often enough in the past. They remembered each other only too well, and, besides, Aglaya could not have changed beyond recognition. She had obviously been forewarned by friends because she had identified her as Valentina Fyodorova right away. She had even said, in a voice almost breaking under the strain that she knew her very well, that they were, in fact, quite close.

Squinting in the icy wind, Aglaya gazed at the ruins of her town with a melancholy smile of reminiscence. She did not look behind—she knew she was being followed. But it did not matter at all just then. In time she would think of some way to give her followers the slip, all she wanted now was to relax from the strain of those horrible days and nights, to relax from the strain of being forever on the alert, ready to put up a resist-

ance when they interrogated her or tried their "heart-to-heart" little talks. She had not been able to think of the future then, she could only think one second ahead, of what trap would be sprung on her, of the present that threatened death. The time would come for her to plan and prepare her getaway from the apparent blind alley into which the Gestapo had driven her. . . .

She would find a way out, of course she would. . . .

She was startled out of her preoccupation by the sudden blare of a military brass band. It was a funeral procession with priests and German officers, a platoon of soldiers walking behind the hearse, and a cortege of passengerless touring cars which belonged to the German command. There were several Mercedes-Benz and Opel-Captains, and one Opel-Admiral. This was the car of the commandant, Major zu Stakkelberg und Waldeck, a fact well known to the partisans because they once threw a hand grenade at it and missed.

"Whose funeral is it? Who died?" she asked a beggar, hobbling along on his crutches behind the procession.

"Oh, it's our Bürgermeister," he answered readily and gaily. "Our Mayor, Mister Zhovtyak. Give a poor beggar a penny, good lady, to burn a candle for our dear deceased so he'll roast with a louder sizzle in hell. . . ."

Aglaya rather enjoyed giving the purple-faced drunk a hundred-mark note, printed at the Berlin factory specialising in kindergarten transfers, and walked on, listening to the mournful brassy wail of the German band. Only two of the people taking the professor on his last journey attracted her attention because she knew them well and also knew what they were doing in town: the hunchback Platon Zemskov and his sister Pasha. . . .

"So they're all right, they didn't get caught," she thought quickly and happily, and turning down a sidestreet suddenly remembered with what fastidious loathing Volodya spoke of the party at Alevtina's he went to with Varya years ago. It was soon after Alevtina left Rodion to marry Dodik, whose birthday party it was. How comically Volodya caricatured a certain Madame Luicie and her preaching of "self-massage", how he cursed their salads as green-fodder and laughed at the dancing of the two elderly flappers Babe and Cookie. . . .

"However, if the household is still like that, it'll be best for me perhaps," she decided soberly, going up the steps of the

veranda from which the paint was peeling. She pulled a wire which protruded from the door frame under the word "Doorbell". The bell jingled feebly at the back of the house somewhere, and then Alevtina's frightened voice asked: "Who is it?" When Aglaya gave her name, the door opened quickly and Alevtina—wrapped in an old fur coat, dishevelled and wild-eyed, gasped: "You?" and took a step back into the shadows.

"Yes, it's me," Aglaya replied in a clear voice, loud enough for the sleuths to hear. "Yes, it's me, your old pal. See, the truth will always out! They released me and what's more they're letting me stay in town and find myself a job. They're really nice people, and so considerate!"

Alevtina stood gaping at her visitor, and suddenly Aglaya recognised her beloved Varya in this wide-open stare.

"Goodness, how like Varya you are just now!" she said with genuine pleasure.

"My Varya? Really?" Alevtina said in a daze, with a wretched, feeble smile. "Come inside, what are we standing out here for. . . ."

The glassed-in veranda smelt of slops, cats, and cold acrid smoke. It was the smell of poverty, and Aglaya grasped at once that Alevtina had not made a career under the Germans.

"Look here," she said, taking hold of Alevtina's elbow. "Listen. Are you sure no one can hear us?"

Alevtina nodded, and then Aglaya explained to her in a tense, unhurried whisper that she would leave right away if she was afraid, but if she was not ("I don't think there's anything for you to be afraid of at all," she added) she would stay until she got a chance to leave, and surely the chance would come. She wanted nothing from Alevtina, she would not drag her into anything, and since they were "registered as close friends" at the Gestapo, Aglaya's staying with her for a while would not attract notice.

"Goodness gracious! How could you think I'd be scared?" Alevtina said, gazing happily at Aglaya with Varya's wide eyes. "Why, I didn't even get scared at the Gestapo, and it was frightening enough there! We'll talk about it later, come inside now, you've got to eat something or have some tea at least. A person can't go hungry. . . ."

Alevtina took her through a cluttered hall into the small, untidy room with the single window where she lived. In the dim light of the gathering wintry dusk, Aglaya peered at the

picture on the wall: it was the "portrait of a cactus" Volodya had often mentioned. The mysterious plant was in bloom, a large, showy flower had burst open proudly on the prickly stem—a beauty born of a freak.

"It's an awful mess. I get so tired, I just can't get anything done," Alevtina said, awkwardly bundling up her badly laundered and unironed washing.

It was indeed a mess. The bed had not been made, and on the table, amid a pile of potato peelings that had already turned black, lay several baked potatoes and a few crusts of bread; there was some damp salt in an old tin, and a little cooking oil in a saucer. The room reeked of cheap stale tobacco, and, more offensively, of German insecticide.

"It's all their doing, the bastards," Alevtina said viciously, nodding at the wall in the rooms beyond which, some Germans were billeted. "They keep spraying this stuff all over the house, and we never had bedbugs in our lives. . . ."

She saw Aglaya examining the photographs on the dresser: there was one of Yevgeny, taken when he was a student, one of Varya with her plaits coiled above her ears, and one of Rodion in civvies.

"Don't be mad that Rodion's here too," Alevtina said nervously. "It doesn't mean anything. It's just that everyone has a family. Or used to have. . . . You see, I've done him so much wrong, I can't begin to tell you how much, and then I found this photograph. . . ."

Her lips began to tremble. She took the photograph and opened a drawer to put it out of sight, but Aglaya stayed her hand, and said, frowning: "Don't be silly. I only stared because I never saw this photograph before. Nor Varya with this funny hairdo. And your Yevgeny really looks smart here," she added with a smile.

"It's their wedding picture," Alevtina said with an answering smile. "I've cut him off from Iraida, she didn't come out well, she's not photogenic at all."

This word belonged to Alevtina's old and long-forgotten "society" talk, and it struck such a false note now that she herself was embarrassed and somewhat dashed, but Aglaya refused to let her feel uncomfortable. She quickly changed the subject, telling Alevtina how brave she thought her for betraying nothing to the Gestapo men.

"As if I'd ever do that!" Alevtina said with a patronising smile. "Do you think I'm that low? We may be all kinds here, but we are still Soviet people!" she pursed her lips as if the words frightened her. "Why, even if a person like Averyanov had the guts. . . ."

"Averyanov the accountant, you mean?" Aglaya asked, looking hard at Alevtina.

"Yeah, that one. . . ."

And drawing Aglaya down beside her on the unmade bed, she whispered to her the story of Averyanov's resurrection and death, the way she heard it from Pasha. It was a long and muddled story she told, nervously smoking and breathing tobacco at Aglaya, who listened with a hand before her black eyes, weeping softly for the first time since the town's evacuation when she said good-bye to Volodya. She wept and smiled when Alevtina told her how the drunk Averyanov threatened to sue her, calling her the blasted almighty Aglaya, whom the court would oblige to pay him compensation out of her own pocket after the war, so she'd never break the law again!

"They shot him just like that?" Aglaya asked through her tears.

"Sure," nodded Alevtina. "There's nothing to it nowadays. Gone are the days when we were human beings and citizens who demanded this and claimed that, yelling the minute we didn't have things our way: 'We're not living under the tsar now! This is a Soviet state!' That's all finished. You don't know, but wait until I tell you everything. Don't cry, why cry about him now, he's all right, Averyanov is. Here, take this hankie, it's a clean one. . . ."

"You mean he started it all?" Aglaya asked, shaking her head and hating herself for these stupid tears.

"Sure. He first went to Okayomova, to your old enemy, and threatened her. He said he was acting on behalf of the Red partisan general staff. And after that he went to the Zemskovs. And Pasha rushed over to me, although it was past curfew and she risked running into a patrol. She looked like a ghost when she came in. What's the use of pretending, it sure hurt that they suspected me and wanted to persuade me. . . ."

"But it was only natural! No one would expect you to have any kindly feelings for me, it's impossible to. . . ."

"It is not a question of feelings," Alevtina said, moving away a little. "What I feel or don't feel about you is my own per-

sonal business, it's the closed world of my soul where no one is allowed to trespass. . . ."

"And I'm not trying to trespass," said Aglaya, suppressing a smile. "It's a senseless discussion, let's drop it. What makes me gladder than anything else is that all of you here proved to be such decent people, even those who hated me personally. . . ."

"Decent, you said?"

"Yes, sure."

"That was a pet word of his," Alevtina said. "Rodion picked it up from someone or somewhere and was forever poking it at me—decent this and indecent that. Was it from you he picked up the word?"

"No, not from me," Aglaya said reminiscently. "They had a teacher at the academy, an old tsarist officer. He publicly called all his former friends, the counter-revolutionaries and the white-guards indecent people when they hatched a plot there. It made a deep impression on Rodion, he told me all about it."

"And he never told me, though I was his wife at the time," Alevtina said bitterly. "He never said a word about any plot. . . . Oh well, why remember it. It won't do me any good thinking about it now. Come on, you must eat something, have these potatoes. . . ."

Aglaya ate the potatoes with a lot of salt. She ate standing by the table, and peering into Rodion's face in the picture on the dresser. His eyes looked down at her steadily and openly, eyes she had not seen for such a frighteningly long time, and uncontrollably she whispered something to those eyes, something quick, tender and comforting, which at the same time was a plea to him to protect her. Alevtina was tidying up the room and did not notice anything. Turning away from the photograph, Aglaya tossed her head and looked at her hostess, watching her put a dirty kettle on a lopsided oil stove and then opening a tin of German bully beef with a blunt knife.

"Do the Germans supply you with that?" Aglaya asked.

"Who, the Germans? What a hope! They're stolen tins. The partisans derailed a train of theirs hereabouts. The news spread like wildfire, naturally, and we all rushed there from the town like a crowd of lunatics. And the bastards opened fire on us! We worked out a system afterwards how to take stuff so the sentries wouldn't see, it's quite an art, you know. But it's worth the risk, there's plenty of fat on this meat. I've two more tins. After that we'll have tea with saccharine, or with dried fruits if

you'd rather—I've been saving a small bag from before the war for some special occasion. . . ."

Thinking that Aglaya did not notice her furtive scrutiny, Alevtina glanced at her critically, looking for signs of age, for crow's-feet at least, and wondering if the mocking gleam was still there in her black eyes. And to herself, she said: no, she doesn't look much older than before, thinner yes, a little perhaps, and her glance is kinder, the eyes are not as piercing. But if it came to the truth, to the real honest truth, Alevtina was every inch as good as she. They were the same height, and both had slim long legs. Aglaya was the darker, both as to hair and complexion, and Alevtina was the fairer, "more ethereal, more feminine", she thought using the affected style she loved. "No wonder Dodik used to call me the *femme absolute*,"—thinking this she pictured Dodik's face, the deep cleft on his carefully shaved chin, his English pipe, and the picturesqueness of his controlled gestures. She remembered Rodion once saying about him in a fit of temper: "Your Dodik is so damned elegant, he'd quite make the grade as an international crook."

No, it was just a bad dream, a stupid nightmare that went on too long. Imagine giving up Rodion for Dodik! And who was that nice, quiet woman weeping in her room? Where was her real husband? What happened to her noisy, forever quarrelling children? Why wasn't old Mefody there, her fair and secret enemy, the first to see that she was a stranger in her own family? And where are you now, Mr. and Mrs. Gogolev, where have you disappeared to, you, who corrupted the soul of your parlourmaid with the deceptive and senseless splendour of your life? There was no bringing anything back now, it was all finished, finished forever. . . .

"What d'you say we have a drink?" she asked, certain that Aglaya would say no. "I have some sweet and some strong liqueur. Just a small glass?"

"I'd like some vodka," came the unexpected reply.

"You would? I have some schnapps, it's German vodka, nasty stuff. We usually dilute it with syrup."

"All right, I'll have it with syrup," Aglaya agreed quickly. "I need a drink badly, to release the brakes."

"What brakes?"

"I feel sort of jammed up, you know," Aglaya explained with a wry smile that made her very beautiful. "I got all tightened up inside while I was in the Gestapo. It's quite a strain, you

know, when you have to weigh up everything all the time, every hour and even every minute, everything that's around you and inside you too: how to answer and if to answer at all, how to look and where to look. It's anything but easy. . . ."

She amazed Alevtina again: not just the smile, but any expression, any change of emotion and mood made her more beautiful than before, everything suited her, everything made her lovelier, and the only thing one could not be sure of was when to say to her: stay the way you are now, you're at your best just now. . . .

"I pushed him into her arms with my own hands," Alevtina's thoughts were painful and bitter. "He preferred her caresses to mine, her love to mine!"

She polished a couple of glasses with a dish towel, poured out the sharply smelling German chemical schnapps and diluted it with some aromatic syrup, all the while keeping her eyes averted from Aglaya, because she could not look at her without staring.

"Well, here's the best! Good luck."

"To you," Aglaya replied gravely and firmly. "To your courage. I did not only hear you, I saw you saying it: 'She is Fyodorova, I know her well, we're quite close'. You knew you were risking your life if they ever found out."

"And what bloody use is this life to me anyway?" Alevtina cried shrilly with a catch in her voice, spilling some of her pinkish drink. "Tell me. You're brainy, you're an authority, so tell me what good is life to me now? Who am I that I should live? What am I—a good worker, someone's beloved wife, or a loving mother to her children? What? The nearest guess is that I'm simply an ageing woman stuffed full of all sorts of fool notions, fixed ideas and manias. I know it's bad of me, but even now I'm seeing you not the way I should, but just as another woman, a rival, though at my age and the mess I've made of things it's a joke, honestly! Hell, what's the use!" She tipped her glass with a quick, habitual and eager gesture, ate a piece of cold potato, and then lit a crumpled cigarette which she fished out of her pocket.

"That's not the way to talk," Aglaya said grimacing. She hated anything even approaching hysterics; screaming, flowery words and self-abasement made her physically sick, and now she dreaded being forced to use the emotional, comforting tone she detested. "Don't," she said. "Before we get fuddled we'd

better work out our line of conduct and invent the legend we're going to use."

"What has legend got to do with this?"

"The story we must stick to. We must stand by it to the death."

"They will kill us for sure?"

"No, not for sure. A great deal will depend on us. You and I are clever enough, aren't we? Surely we can't be less clever than the fascists! And as for our convictions, we're stronger than anyone in that. Our cause is right."

Looking unwaveringly into Alevtina's eyes and speaking in a calm, level voice, Aglaya told her the particulars of Valentina Fyodorova's life. She told her when and where they were supposed to have met, what interests they had in common, what made them close friends, and what moments in Valentina's biography were of especial importance.

Alevtina listened absent-mindedly. She kept asking things over and over again and seemed embarrassed by her absent-mindedness. And suddenly she asked: "Did the Party give you this assignment?"

"And now I'll have a drink, too," Aglaya said, raising the glass in her small, steady hand. "And I still want to drink to your courage, Alevtina. By the way, we'd better use chummy names, call each other Val or something, we're supposed to be old friends."

"But who sent you here?" Alevtina insisted, and Aglaya understood that it was torment for her to know that she was not being trusted and that Aglaya had a life apart. "After all, with your Party record you couldn't have come to town just for the fun of it?"

"I never came to town," said Aglaya, glad of this opportunity to side-step the main issue without hurting Alevtina's feelings. "They didn't pick me up in town at all. . . ."

And, calmly, she told her the story she had told at the Gestapo to von Zanke and Wenzlow, the story as told by Valentina Fyodorova and not Aglaya Ustimenko.

"How frightening!" Alevtina broke in, shaking her head. "Oh, how frightening! Don't you see? You pushed me out of your circle, and now I'm a foreign body to all of you. But I used to be one of you, you know that, and they, when they got together, they talked about their military matters without minding me. They would sit at the table, your late brother Afanasy

and my . . . and Rodion, with their friends and sing. That was before your time, it was when our beautiful love was in flower. You know what they sang?"

*I'm a sailor bold and handsome,
And I'm only twenty years of age,
Will you love me, I'm so sad and lonesome,
Will you let me say that we're engaged . . .*

Imitating her former mistress, Mrs. Gogoleva the barrister's wife, Alevtina pressed her fingertips to her temples, the way that lady did when she had one of her migraine attacks.

"It's awful!" she said. "It's a closed circle, a deadlock, a fog as thick as cotton wool. And it's not even a circle, it's a circle within a circle."

Aglaya looked gravely at her husband's first wife, and suddenly felt sorry for her.

"I am Valentina Fyodorova, your old friend," she said in a clear, compulsive whisper. "That's all you must remember to help us. You will be rendering us valuable assistance and taking a risk. Too much talking is not done among people engaged on an assignment, understand? Don't shake your head, look at me!"

She placed her hand on Alevtina's wrist and raised her voice a little: "You stood the test, didn't you?"

"You're fools, all of you!" Alevtina said angrily, taking another drink and relighting her cigarette. "Fools! You don't understand a damned thing! You abandoned me and let my boat just drift downstream. Did he ever try to raise me to his level? He gave me money for household expenses, and lived in his shell, like a crab or something. *His* ships! *His* sailors! And me, sinking to the bottom slowly but surely until he despised me and quite rightly, so who's to blame for that? Father Xmas, maybe? He ought to have educated me, and then I'd have unfolded and turned my face to the future, but I was abandoned. And maybe I'm no worse than others!"

She jerked her hand free from Aglaya's, and burst out crying.

"Don't mind me, please. Don't listen. They say that even a flower protests if you trample on it. And I'm a woman, with all a woman's weaknesses. Come on, let's drink on this, and do please rely on me. Trust me, will you? I know that your sort is not allowed to talk to my sort. But if you'd once gone through

what we go through here every day, if you'd lived the life we're living here, you'd understand, you'd appreciate our sufferings. And you wouldn't dare look down on us. A crushed butterfly, too, once fluttered its pretty wings in the gentle rays of the sun, and that's something to bear in mind and remember. . . . Listen now, I'll tell you about our life here. . . ."

She drank another glass of schnapps, washed it down with some hot water out of the kettle, and then began to speak in a hurried whisper.

Aglaya listened frowning, sighing, and squirming from Alevtina's stupid way of expressing herself and the unbelievable horror of their day-to-day life under the nazis. No, she had been unaware of all this. There, in the forest, they knew about the executions, the hunger, the hostages, the gas chambers. They knew about Oswiecim and Majdanek, about Hitler's old, prewar concentration camps, but the strangulating routine of the everyday life of those whom the Germans officially called subhuman, was mentioned in neither the secret service reports from town, nor in the radio broadcasts from Moscow to which the partisans listened in the forest.

"They don't trust their own people any, either," Alevtina was saying quickly, leaning close to Aglaya. "In our casino—it's a restaurant, Sweet Bavaria—there's a character who's sort of helping the bartenders all day long. He's extra top-secret, brought here specially, I wouldn't know myself, but all our waitresses say so, they've got his number: this top-secret character is a deaf-mute. He watches the officers' lips to see who says what, and takes shorthand notes. It's a fact, the girls have seen the notes. They've got a lot of narks, they brag about it themselves. Me too they tried to hire, even though I only work in the pantry slicing vegetables. They offered to promote me to waitress, that means an extra food ration, but I played dumb and it helped. They only made me sign a paper which said they'd hang me if I talked. And do you know about the hospital, the one where the university clinic used to be?"

"No, how could I?"

"Well, it's no hospital, it's just a place where they shoot people. All of them in white coats, all of them so neat, so handsome, gay and friendly. Naturally, they're always a bit high, because they get rum, cigarettes and extra food for doing what they do. A person goes in there, and a 'doctor' looks inside his mouth. If he has any gold caps on his teeth this doctor paints a tiny

cross on his cheek with a fine brush. Nothing special, it's just an innocent little cross. And then they measure people's height. Zollinger, a Gestapo man, a cute young fellow, as pretty as a doll, likes going there to measure people's height. He also wears a white coat, it all looks right and proper. Well, when a person stands up against the wall to get his measurements, a slit opens in the wall on a level with his head, and there's a shot. After that, a soldier attendant opens a trapdoor in the floor and the dead body falls into the cellar. And there's music, naturally."

"Music?"

"Sure. They play the gramophone very loud so the new arrivals won't hear the shooting. People get written orders to come for a medical check-up, and so they sit in the garden, waiting their turn. It wouldn't be nice if they heard the shots. That's why they play the gramophone, so no one will guess. Why don't you tell people in your proclamations or leaflets or whatever it is you write that they must never go when they're summoned for a medical check-up. . . ."

Aglaya said nothing, but a flush appeared on her cheeks.

Lighting another cigarette, Alevtina laughed tearfully, and in that still room the sound was pitiful and uncanny.

"It's my fault, actually," she said, inhaling deeply. "Madame Lisse and that bitch Lucie kept saying to me: 'Why, child, don't make us laugh! The German army is a model of discipline and propriety. You are a good seamstress, and besides you can always take in boarders, officers will come and take meals at your house. Your husband has left you, your conscience will be perfectly clear, and you really must live a full life! You're too young to bury yourself alive!' And so they got me a job as a waitress. My very first day I spilled some soup into the lap of a Gebietskommissar, a dandy he was. He grabbed the plate and threw what was left of the soup in my face. And Madame Lisse said: 'Well, don't be a clumsy fool next time, try to do your job *elegantly*'. . . ."

She sobbed again, and poured herself another glass of schnapps.

"I'm a despicable person, you think?"

"Drop it," Aglaya said, her thoughts elsewhere. "I'm wondering about something else. Why, in spite of your connection with that Madame Lisse of yours, did Pasha Zemskova venture to come to you?"

"I wouldn't know," Alevtina said sullenly. "How should I know? I'm all alone, no one talks to me. I clean vegetables in the basement with a German gadget, then I slice them as I'm told, and after that I go home. If there's anything to drink, I drink it, if not I go to bed without. That's all, all my dreams. Suppose our people come back, what will I be then? A traitor?"

Without waiting for an answer, she got up, fetched a basin of water, and took a set of underwear from the dresser. It was a pretty baby-blue, tied with a ribbon and never worn once. She also put a new pair of stockings and a blouse, hand-embroidered in red, on the bed.

"Wash in this," she said handing Aglaya the basin. "A wash will make you feel better after the jail. The room's warm, you won't catch cold. When I feel blue, I adore a scrub. You begin to breathe with every pore then, and not your lungs alone. Here's everything clean for you. And I adore undies of de luxe quality, I'm really sorry lace is not in just now. I remember Madame Gogoleva letting her peignoir fall open and there, there'd be billows of lace, like foam-crested waves upon the sea..."

Aglaya, lost in thought, took off her clothes. She did not see the narrow-eyed look with which Alevtina, her husband's first wife who still bore his name, examined her in her nakedness—taking in her slender peach-coloured back, her firm breasts that were set far apart, her slim ankles and small feet. Nor did she see Alevtina turn away sharply, drink some more schnapps, and smile venomously, scornfully and miserably as she said to herself in a whisper: "Well, why don't you turn her in? Tell them about Platon and Pasha too, they'll believe you. It's your day, go and get even..."

"What are you mumbling about?" Aglaya asked, lathering a long, shapely leg. Her eyes flashed merrily in her flushed, tanned face. "Am I too much trouble?"

Afterwards they had some tea and went to bed. In the middle of the night Aglaya woke up because she heard Alevtina weeping. Her whole body was shaken by uncontrollable sobs, she was choking with tears and biting her pillow.

"Come now, come! Don't cry now!" Aglaya said gently.

"A whole life wasted!" Alevtina said, barely audibly. "A whole life has flashed past like a dream! The pity of it, Aglaya dear! And now it's all gone, there's no bringing anything back. And there's no one to blame, I've no one to blame for anything but myself."

"Go to sleep now," Aglaya told her. "You and I have a difficult time ahead of us, and I want us both to be in good shape. Understand?"

"I do," Alevtina said docilely.

And she fell asleep.

Sometimes It's Good To Be Late

Officially Sweet Bavaria closed at 11 p. m. but actually that was when the real fun began, because the officers of Group "C" were usually busy until then or even later.

As a rule, the cream of the garrison, headed by the commandant, Baron Major zu Stakkelberg und Waldeck and the Standartenführer von Zanke, arrived at close on midnight. Until 10:30, people simply ate and drank there, drunkenly bawling songs of the popular "I'll wipe your tears with sandpaper" type, but after 10:30 the composition of the clientele underwent an abrupt change, aided, of course, by the MPs who, thrusting out their chins covered by their helmet liners, and holding their tommy guns on the ready, stomped through the main halls and the private rooms, and hoddily threw out the drunks, irrespective of rank, and deaf to threats and curses. "I represent the Führer here!" von Zanke once said, and these words, uttered by the dreaded old man, just as the implications of his black uniform with the lightning flashes as collar insignia and the single right shoulder loop, burnt on the brain of the soldiers.

While the soldiers were being chucked out, swearing and cursing, and hastened on their way by the MPs, the waitresses aired the rooms, changed the tablecloths, switched on more lights, and placed new menu cards on the tables, their "night menu" cards offering wines and dishes worlds apart from those the earlier customers were offered, but the difference was only in the quality, not the price. The Gestapo officers of Group "C", the SA and the SK and their guests paid exactly as much for the excellent brandies, rare French and German vintage wines as the less privileged paid for the synthetic rum, yellow schnapps and the meat patties consisting more of bread crumbs than beef which were usually served to them. Such was the rule enforced by Himmler's commissariat, it was highly confidential, needless to say, and so a guard was posted in the vestibule after 10:30 every night, a duty carried out by well-mannered sergeants who

were quick on the uptake and who knew every one of the eligible customers by sight. Their orders were under no circumstances to admit any outsiders to this haven where the men, on whose efforts and endeavour rested the great thousand-year Reich, relaxed in an intimate, homely atmosphere after a day of arduous, nerve-racking and strenuous toil.

On the night of February 15, 1942—a frosty night with a whistling, hissing ground wind—the first arrival, as usual, was Zollinger, who walked in with a gay, friendly smile in his clear sky-blue eyes, a sweet rosy flush on his doll-like cheeks, and a ready good-natured joke for everyone on his red lips.

He tossed his cap and fur-lined coat into the servilely outstretched arms of the sergeants on duty, complained to them in a friendly manner about the “abominable Russian winter”, greeted the curtsying waitresses with a not too loud “Heil Hitler”, and told them to “kindly request” Herr Voitsekhovsky to come and speak to him. While waiting for Voitsekhovsky, he looked at the menu card and then beckoned to Frau Eva, the handsome red-cheeked Bavarian, a Hamburg brothel keeper whom the Gestapo had brought with them.

“Keep this under your hat, Eva,” Zollinger said to her. “This is a special occasion, as you know. It’s the Standartenführer’s sixtieth birthday, which, of course, you also know. We’ve just learnt that our informal party is to be on a much grander affair than anyone could have imagined. Brigadenführer Merkel is motoring here to decorate Colonel von Zanke with the oak leaves to his Iron Cross. And so be good enough to see that everything is first-class.”

His innocent baby-blue gaze bored into Frau Eva’s eyes with such ominous, blood-chilling compulsion, that even this primed nazi madam flinched, backed away in fright and, bowing, implored him to trust her loyalty, devotion and experience.

“I’ll be glad to!” said the “good kid” and whistling, “Deserts hold no fear for Rommel” slowly walked the length of the banquet table on soft, cat-like feet, to see with his own eyes that everything was indeed ready and waiting for the celebrations to begin.

Voitsekhovsky, the former local landowner, who had recently returned to Russia and was now caterer-in-chief for the Reich officers, inclined his glossy head in greeting to Zollinger from the far end of the room. He had become quite an expert in the

restaurant business in those long years of self-exile; his Volga-Volga, Dnieper, Georgian Shashlyk, Russian Blini, Siberian Pelmeni and other similarly named establishments, scattered all over Germany, in towns and the countryside, brought in an income of sorts, but his ambition was to get back all his real estate in Russia. True, his hopes on this score had been realised, but only in a disappointingly small measure, and that day in particular his spirits were rather low.

"Is everything in order?" Zollinger asked, without offering him his hand.

"We do our best," said Voitsekhovsky, pursing his thin lips. "Meat is a problem. The beef we get. . ."

Zollinger smiled thinly.

"Each gets his deserts' we usually write on the gates of our concentration camps," he said with a meaning. "Do you see what I mean, Herr Voitsekhovsky? You provide our dinners and we provide your security. Those who do nothing get their 'deserts'."

"One minute please," Voitsekhovsky said dryly. "My estate, which is called the Chorny Yar Aeroplane by the local population but whose original name was The Nook, has been taken over by a hospital. . . ."

Zollinger frowned. He was in no mood to talk shop. However, Voitsekhovsky forestalled his objections by telling him that he had been trying to get in touch with the Gestapo by telephone since his return from The Nook that afternoon but without success. It was no fault of his, and the information he had to report was extremely important.

"Well, make it short," Zollinger told him.

"Just two words: a Bolshevik woman, a Communist, the wife of that old Communist Bogoslovsky and their daughter Sasha, a Komsomol member of the most brazen sort, still think they own the place. Surely this scum can be done away with?"

"It can," Zollinger replied. "It can, everything can, my dear Voitsekhovsky, but all in its own good time. We still have use for Bogoslovskaya. Why frighten off the game before a kill becomes really profitable? You do see my point, I hope?"

Voitsekhovsky inclined his head, and Zollinger left him to go and greet von Zanke who, leaning on his stick, was entering the room with a party of twelve of his officers in black service coats and several trainees in the uniform of their armies, to whom he was, as usual, holding forth on something.

The waitresses curtsied ceremoniously, and von Zanke made a fastidious grimace.

"Must they do it?" he said. "It's such bad taste. A typical Heidelberg brothel in those long ago days of my youth. Zollinger, I trust this wasn't your idea? And not yours either, Herr Voitsekhovsky? A waiter should be non-existent, more spirit than flesh, do you get my meaning?"

Zollinger smirked. Voitsekhovsky sighed, and von Zanke proceeded down the room, all his many crosses and medals a-jingling and a-clicking.

"There is a doctrine alleging that the conquered must be given a semblance of freedom," he went on with his lecture, running his eye over the respectful, stony faces of his officers. "What is more, it is maintained that the conquered love semblances and believe in them, hoping that in time they will be completely free. This, gentlemen, is an extremely harmful doctrine. Faith in the future is pregnant with struggle for that future, everyone should realise it. And Providence has chosen us to expel the very thought of the future from their minds, and, consequently, the possibility of a struggle for it. Our task is to ensure docile, obedient communications, castrated both morally and spiritually. And it is not the extermination of individuals that we should concern ourselves with, but the extermination of those masses which are accustomed to communistic thinking, masses which are silent but whose silence is fraught with protest. . . ."

Voitsekhovsky led von Zanke and his retinue to their seats at the head of the long table, and then hurried off to the kitchens to see how things were going. Waitresses were already bringing in the hors-d'oeuvres. He told them: "Quickly, girls, quickly," from force of habit, and took his private spiral staircase down. Lighting a thin, black, aromatic cigar, he stopped in the doorway—his feet in their patent-leather shoes planted far apart, his hand on his chest in a napoleonic pose. And in that same instant he saw a short and, possibly, hunchbacked "outsider", obviously wearing a padded jacket under his white smock, slip past the zinc-topped carving table with quick, bow-legged sort of steps, and disappear behind the broad backs of the soldier-cooks, called in to help that night.

"Who's that?" Voitsekhovsky called after the stranger had vanished, but the German cooks did not hear.

Cutlets were sizzling noisily in butter on the stove, finely sliced

potatoes were being plopped into frying pans from a pail, there was a general clatter of pots and pans, and in that noise Voitsekhovsky had to try and find out who was that "quick bow-legged hunchback"—which was all the description he could give of him.

He found Alevtina in the vegetable room all by herself—she seemed to be deep in thought as she sliced the beetroots.

"How do you do, madame," Voitsekhovsky's greeting was gay and civil. It was a rule of his always to be polite and as charming as possible to the Russians in personal dealings.

"Good-evening," Alevtina answered, a bit surprised.

"You're well, I hope?"

"Yes, I'm well, thank you," she replied, feeling frightened now.

He stood in front of her, rocking backwards and forwards, now putting the weight on the heels and now on the balls of his feet. His patent-leather shoes creaked in the silence of the deep basement room.

"Who was he—that quick, bow-legged man? He was on his way from here, from the meat-frying room, I noticed. Is he a hunchback, perhaps? Or just short and fat? But I still think he was a hunchback."

"From here?" Alevtina sounded surprised. "No, there was no one here at all. I sliced the potatoes and then I took the pail to the kitchen myself. Maybe he came while I was out of the room? But I don't see how he could, I'd have bumped into him, I was away for less than a minute, I just handed them the pail, you know how it is. . . ."

Voitsekhovsky shrugged, nodded to Alevtina, and taking the service stairs rather than his private spiral staircase, went up and out into the yard where the ground wind was whistling viciously and where, to his surprise, he did not see the sentry usually posted there.

"Soldat!" he called out in German. "Anyone here?"

The soldier, obviously frozen stiff in his thin grey-green coat and his knitted helmet liner, immediately appeared from around the corner where he was sheltering from the wind.

"Did anyone just come out?" Voitsekhovsky asked him sternly.

Very politely and in great detail the soldier explained that his orders were to let everyone out after 11 p.m. because that was time for everyone to leave. His orders were not to admit anyone, that's all.

Voitsekhovsky went inside again, banging the door shut, found his lighter and lit another of his slim black cigars. He stood reflecting for a moment on all those silly rules, and then, uttering a guttural exclamation of disgust, straightened the pearl pin in his grey tie, tugged at the cuffs of his white shirt with an habitual gesture, and turned to go to the banquet hall when he saw Alevtina coming on her way out, dressed in a shabby overcoat and an old woolen head scarf. She was eating something, picking clean a bone, Voitsekhovsky thought. When she saw him she became terribly embarrassed, blushed, and tears sprang to her still beautiful eyes.

"Oh, it's all right," he said patronisingly. "No need to blush, madame. Having a bite is not stealing. And, naturally, a good-looking woman must have a chance to eat good food in order to keep her looks. You may always eat here, you have my permission to do so. Are you pleased?"

Alevtina was frightened. She was afraid he would ask her again about that "quick, bow-legged man" whom, truth to tell, she had seen. She had actually bumped into him in the door of her vegetable room, where he must have come by mistake. The man was Platon Zemskov. The encounter and their instant recognition of each other had caused him to step back quickly. In that split second Alevtina had noticed that he was very pale: he had the tense expression of a person who has just thrown off a great load but had not yet got his breath back.

"Oh, it's Platon Zakharovich? Are you working here now?" she had asked him, surprised.

"Who, me?" he had asked, quickly closing the door.

And when she had carried the pail of sliced potatoes into the kitchen and he had been nowhere in sight, it had dawned on her that he had stolen into the restaurant for some purpose of his own, which she was not allowed to know. And now they must have caught him, and Voitsekhovsky had already found out that she had seen and recognised Zemskov. They would take her to the Gestapo, and that would mean ruin to Aglaya.

"Madame is very beautiful," said Voitsekhovsky. "Madame is very sad, but very beautiful."

"Go on! I'm an old, old woman!" Alevtina replied.

"Oh, madame!" he exclaimed. "It pains me to hear you say that! If you're an old, old woman, what does it make me?"

"Maybe he doesn't know anything," Alevtina thought.

"If madame is an old, old woman, I'm a Methuselah!" he said, with a white-toothed smile. "But I'm not grumbling, I'm not complaining. And no one can complain against me..."

"He doesn't know!" Alevtina decided.

"We all think your energy really amazing!" she said. "Everyone says what an attractive gentleman we've got for a director."

And, as in those long-past days when helping the Gogolevs' gentlemen friends into their coats, Alevtina flashed him a look so warm, intense and thrilling, that the ageing lady's man twitched his shoulders and promised to help her make a career as a waitress.

"You can't make a career in the kitchens," he said, smiling sweetly. "It's only upstairs, in the restaurant..."

"I couldn't, I'm clumsy, I'd never manage," she said, glancing demurely at him. "I'm not the modern type, I haven't the appeal."

"Now, now, dear lady, you are quite the modern type. And please remind me tomorrow of this pleasant chat we've had."

As she walked up the stairs, he glanced at her shapely and still beautiful legs, and sighed, thinking how sadly life with all its worries and cares was depriving him of those few remaining joys a man approaching sixty could still taste.

Meanwhile, as Alevtina turned down her own street, she decided that she had done right to keep Voitsekhovsky there talking, thus giving Zemskov a chance to get away. After all, he could not have come to their kitchen just like that: most probably someone was slipping food to him. . . .

The main hall and the private rooms of Sweet Bavaria were already crowded when Voitsekhovsky walked in, and began looking for Zollinger. The "good kid" was standing behind von Zanke, and Voitsekhovsky threaded his way towards him with the habitual mincing gait of a waiter. The "quick, bow-legged hunchbacked outsider" still worried him, and so he bent close to Zollinger's pink, perfectly shaped ear to share his anxiety with him, but the man silenced him with a shake of his head, and Voitsekhovsky, too, began to listen to what von Zanke was saying in his deep rumbling voice.

"Gentlemen, the struggle waged by the citizens of the United States against Negroes contains exactly the same idea as our struggle against the Jews. However, every anti-semite is a spontaneous national-socialist who needs only to have the moulding of his character completed for him and the history of the

problem and its more energetic idea, so to speak, crammed into him. They will undoubtedly follow our road, if not now then later. They have no leader, but does this present a problem? We shall get them an excellent leader, we have the experience, take Austria, Slovakia, Czechia, Moravia, Denmark and Norway—we know how to make small, industrious, disciplined and obedient leaders. And we're not in any hurry, you know! Who knows, maybe at this very moment in München or Düsseldorf or even in Berlin a pure-blooded Yankee has been hatched and is going through a certain training stage, a person who is courageous and a little mad, brilliant and a wee bit childish, filled with our idea yet capable of presenting it with a different sauce, let us say mayonnaise and not hollandaise, to use a gastronomic simile...."

Von Zanke stretched his old, bony hand, with the flat wedding ring on the fourth finger, towards his tumbler, and Zollinger quickly filled it for him with Vichy water.

"We even have water from France, how solicitous the Führer is for our welfare!" Von Zanke growled adoringly.

"Heil!" Zollinger said softly.

"Heil!" cried the officers.

"And not just the Vichy water either," deferentially Voitsekovsky thrust himself nearer von Zanke, eager to make the best of his moment and his subject. "A parcel arrived by plane today with some Camembert cheese from Paris, oysters from Ostend, and also shrimps and some deliciously fresh Strasbourg paté de foie gras...."

Von Zanke inclined his head slightly. The paté de foie gras hardly merited a shout of "heil" but it was a piece of welcome news all the same.

"The genius of our Führer," he took up his speech again, peering into the faces of his officers to whom he had mentioned the night of the "long daggers" only a few days before and who now sat like hushed children round their wise old grandfather. "The genius of the Führer is also manifested in that his system of rewarding people for their deeds is tangible, it is fleshly, material and weighty. The Führer does not merely conquer peoples, but with his admirable, unique energy he immediately makes these peoples begin to work for our material well-being. The conquest of France is not an ephemeral conquest—the Camembert from Paris proves it. Our operation Night and Fog XXI received its reward the moment its success became known at

headquarters. The oak leave for my cross, which Parteigenosse Brigadenführer Merkel will present to me tonight, just as the decorations which you, my boys, will receive from him, are realistic rewards and not a promise of reward in heaven. . . ."

He would have gone on for ever, but at that moment Sturm-bannführer Wenzlow took the liberty of interrupting in order to make a loud and joyful announcement: "Brigadenführer Merkel has passed the control post at Kapelyukha Station."

The old fox turned slightly pale. Behind his back, Voitsekhovsky was telling Zollinger in a quick whisper about the bow-legged hunchback who had slipped away, but the "good kid" was not listening. He was worried about the band, and pushing Voitsekhovsky aside he hurried over to the leader to tell him just when to start *Horst Wessel*. He wouldn't put it past that ass to begin with the song "Raise the Banner Higher" instead of the "Grand March", as had already happened on one occasion. On the way across the room he heard von Zanke's loud, solemn words:

"I will ask you to rise, my boys, to welcome our glorious Brigadenführer!"

It was the last thing Zollinger heard, because the sound of the explosion did not reach any of them—neither the officers of Group "C" nor the officers of the Kommandantur who had at that moment entered the hall behind Major zu Stakkelberg und Waldeck. But that's as may be, for the dead, as everyone knows, don't talk. The blasting charge set by the small hunch-backed Platon Zemskov did its righteous deed. The explosion occurred at 11:50 p.m. on February 15, 1942. The three-storeyed building, the ground floor of which was occupied by the casino Sweet Bavaria, was illumined for a short time by leaping orange flames that seemed to come tearing out of the bowels of the earth, and then the roof and walls fell in slowly, and a whistling, howling fire engulfed all.

Wolfgang Merkel, the huge, round-shouldered, bony Brigadenführer of the SS, an old friend of the late von Zanke, drove up to the blazing building in his black, bullet-proof limousine.

Pursing his lips in a fastidious grimace and paying no attention to what his slick aide was trying to tell him, he addressed the roaring fire as if his interlocutors were there:

"Well? Why the devil did you rush me so?"

A Hopeless Philistine

Alevtina, trembling violently, her eyes filled with tears, her hands unable to remain still for a moment—was crushing and tearing a matchbox to bits, playing with a knife, placing the cup, the glass, the tin of bully beef and the ashtray in a row. . . .

"Were a lot of people arrested? Aglaya asked.

Alevtina nodded, a tear rolled down her cheek and splashed on the table.

"Try and pull yourself together, Alevtina!"

"I'm all right, but I can't help my nerves. They're arresting everyone, even those who were sick in bed that night. There're whole planes of them arriving straight from Germany, smug bastards who've never seen front-line fighting, proper hangmen, every one of them. It was the Sonderkommando that usually arrived in such cases, and now it's these. I've forgotten the name. They're the top ones in this business, there's no one higher. They go from house to house, and they don't say a word except for their beloved 'schneller'. They have been ordered to shoot a person down at once if there's anything wrong."

"And who's their chief?"

"Some dragon from Berlin, a Brigadenführer, the swine is. He never leaves his room. They say he even cooks his own food, he eats fried eggs. They've put cordons of submachine-gunners round the Gestapo. You can't even walk on the other side of the street. . . ."

Suddenly she clutched her head with her hands and moaned: "Why doesn't the snowstorm ever stop, it's been whistling and howling for days and days. . . ."

"What you need is a sedative," Aglaya told her. "Or some hot tea."

"I've got some German pills, the pep kind, the ones they give to their tankmen," Alevtina told her. "I'll take a couple and wash them down with schnapps."

Aglaya shrugged. Alevtina took two pills, drank some schnapps diluted with tea, and lit a cigarette.

"It's Zemskov's doing," she stated flatly.

"How can you be so sure?"

"I told you, didn't I, how he ran into me and jumped back, and how I flirted with the director afterwards to lull any suspicions he may have had. . . ."

"Zemskov's being there may have been accidental. . . ."

Alevtina snorted disdainfully.

"I tried to distract Voitsekhovsky, and you're trying to distract me. It's funny, honestly. Since you're staying with me and relying on me it means that you must trust me. And if you don't, why stay with me? Oh well, this talk will get me nowhere, it's just a waste of breath because you'll give me no answers, I've got used to that by now. I suppose you want to know where the Zemskovs are now? They've simply vanished. The Germans have combed their street, all the cellars, and even the ruins, but they got away, must have gone to your people. Are you glad?"

"Of course I'm glad!" Aglaya replied with a lingering smile.

"Where our Sweet Bavaria used to be there's something like a pit now. They collected the pieces with tongs to fill the coffins."

"What d'you mean—tongs?" Aglaya asked squeamishly.

"Why, ordinary fireplace tongs, long ones, you know. They'd throw some tatters into the coffin, and then some bricks on top, or frozen sand, or lime or something for weight. They'd nail the lid down right there in the pit, and write on it in chalk 'Sturm-bannführer Wenzlow' or something. And that stuff inside is not Wenzlow at all, maybe. . . it's part of that Frau Eva person, or maybe that famous und Waldeck, you know, the commandant."

"Was he there too?"

"Sure. I've already told you that no one escaped alive, there's nobody left except the woman they call Dog's Death, she keeps running in circles and screaming, must be off her nut. They've taken her away now, they'll probably lock her up in the madhouse."

"What's it like in town?"

"The way you'd expect it—everyone's lying low. Even the kids stay indoors. There's no smoke rising from the chimneys, no light burning in the windows. People are afraid. . . ."

Aglaya shivered, and repeated the words: "No smoke rising from the chimneys, no light burning in the windows."

Alevtina looked at her gravely, kneaded a cigarette with her fingers and took a long time to light it and get it going.

"I've a plan, Aglaya, something I've worked out. I've been thinking it over for a long time, and now I want to tell you about it. May I?"

"A plan?"

"It's a lovely, simple little plan. You just listen and forget that you're the only clever one. Just listen to this: you've seen those two walking backwards and forwards in front of the bakery all the time. One's long and thin, and the other's shorter and

fatter. Flatfoots, they're called. And they look very hard when you come out. But only from afar. They can't see your face properly from there, they just know you by your figure and, of course, your clothes. They don't dare ask the dragon, their Brigadenführer, for new orders. So they're still acting on the old ones, as if Sweet Bavaria had never been blown up at all. But then maybe someone's told the dragon just why you're out, what they'd set you temporarily free for. And he's fallen in with their plan, it's possible isn't it?"

Aglaya nodded: it was quite possible, why not. Alevtina drank some lukewarm water out of the kettle in large, thirsty gulps, wiped her tear-streaked face with the palm of her hand, and made an effort to pull herself together and master the violent shaking that came over her in fits.

"We have nothing to lose," she said resolutely. "They'll arrest us anyway, sooner or later. And there's no maybe about it now. They'll arrest us and hang us because they're hanging and shooting right and left now, they've already posted the order announcing the death sentences for the Sweet Bavaria blasting. It's called 'mass executions'. Well, here's my plan: I'll come out pretending I'm you, in your coat, your shawl and your boots. The cut of your coat is so inelegant, coats are never cut like that any more, honestly I don't know where you ever got an old-fashioned thing like that. That fur is only used for men's collars too, but it's eye-catching just the same. Those two out there will be tickled pink that you've come out at last and they'll run after me. I'll take them as far as I can into some ruins so they'll think they've got hold of some mysterious secret. And while I'm leading them this merry dance and getting them all muddled, you'll get away. You must wear my coat and I'll let you have my fox choker too, it's not a silver fox but it's chic, they're the fashion in Europe just now. You'll also wear my hat, and my woolen scarf high up over your chin. And my high-heeled shoes, the pretty ones, you know, we take the same size though my arches are higher. Then there's my bag and my suede gloves, I've still got all those things, and in pretty good condition too. You go to Ovrazhki where their control post is, but go down the street a bit, not where the market used to be but where the new building for the dressmaking salon was started, remember? It's all been bombed and blasted so you'll easily slip past the control post through the ruins and get to Zarchye. You'll have to manage for yourself there, I have six silver spoons, anyone

driving a sleigh from market will give you a ride for them. I've also a dress length, you take that too. And another thing: if only one of them follows me and not both, I'll come back at once as if I've changed my mind about going anywhere. Mind you take a good look round when you come out—you never know. If there's no one there—make the dash. Is everything clear?"

"Yes, of course, it's clear." Aglaya said pensively. "But, Alevtina, they'll kill you, you know they'll kill you when they find out."

"As a matter of fact they'll kill me anyway," Alevtina said with a throaty chuckle. "They will kill me, because that's what they're doing to all the Sweet Bavaria staff. I know for sure. But you see, if it happens their way, my death will be as senseless and bitter as the life I've lived, but if it happens our way I'll die a beautiful death, I'll come to flower like that ugly cactus over there!"

With a jerk of her chin she indicated the "portrait of a cactus" on the wall, the ugly, prickly plant which had miraculously produced a large, beautiful flower.

"By the way, don't think that I want to do something for you personally," Alevtina spoke again, and her sharp whisper suddenly betrayed her deep-rooted hatred for Aglaya. "I wouldn't do a thing for you. If it wasn't for you, Rodion would have forgiven me a little later, and what's more he'd have fallen in love with me all over again and blamed himself for everything. But you had to turn up at the wrong moment just when I had done that terribly foolish thing. You knew when to come along, at a time when he was feeling so low because of my crazy doings, and now it's all over, it's all finished between him and me. And so, my dear Aglaya Petrovna, don't have any illusions about my doing this for the sake of your pretty slanted eyes, anything but. I'm doing it only because I don't want to die as rottenly as I lived. And if you escape with your life," Alevtina suddenly spoke like a tragedienne, her voice swelling with emotion. "If you survive, your communist conscience will not let you conceal the truth, but on the contrary it will compel you to tell Rodion how beautifully and nobly I sacrificed my life. . . ."

"You mean you're just doing this for the glamour?" Aglaya demanded sharply. "Is that what you want me to tell him, about how beautiful and noble it was?"

"No, no, not like that!" Alevtina whispered, alarmed. "Not like that, don't do it like that! That's just a lot of rubbish,

Aglaya, it's my nerves and those blasted German pep pills. Don't mind me, my nerves are really in an awful state, I'm just a bundle of nerves. You tell Rodion that his Alevtina lived foolishly but she would not die dishonourably. Her death had to serve a useful purpose, she wouldn't have it differently. You tell him she was determined to carry everything out according to her own plan so he wouldn't think, neither he nor the children—Varya and Yevgeny—that I was one of those hopeless philistines. True, I did not understand everything at first, but after all I didn't do anything so bad that they'd need to be ashamed of me. But why am I saying all this to you? I can dislike you personally and think you mean and vicious, but you're a straight and honest person just the same. You'll know how to tell him. . . ."

Sobs choked her, but quickly mastering her emotion, she turned her back on Aglaya and began pulling open the drawers of the chest and chucking things out: her smart fur choker, hat, woolen scarf, and everything else required for the masquerade. The house was empty and silent but for the scratching of the snow against the frost-encrusted windows, and the monotonous tick-tocking of the clock on the wall.

Not a word was said between them as Alevtina put on Aglaya's clothes and studied herself for a long time in the mirror.

"I'm white-skinned and fair, and you're dark, you're quite the Gipsy type," Alevtina said. "Wait a minute, I'll put on some make-up, I've got that shade, it's very good, I've a whole tone range of make-up, Dodik gave the kit to me before the war, it's imported, he got it from a black-market dealer for a wicked price. Lucie was crazy about it, she begged me on her bended knees to sell it to her, but I said: nothing doing! I'll put on a darker shade and you choose the lightest. And do pin up your black hair, tuck it all in or you'll get caught. . . ."

And again the clock could be heard in the silence, and the dry snow scratching on the windowpane. Alevtina, her eyes shining feverishly and her lips trembling a little, was smoothing the tan powder on her face with her fingertips. Then she put on Aglaya's shawl and tied the ends how Aglaya did it.

"Old Marlborough's off to battle," she said, "It's an old humorous song, you know. Well, old Marlborough that's me. Let's sit down for good luck, shall we?"

She sat down for a minute, smoking in silence, and then got up and without a backward glance left the room.

The two men were still walking up and down in front of the bakery.

One of them quickly slipped into the nearest doorway, and the other pretended to be reading the order pasted on the wall. Alevtina stood in front of the house, as though making up her mind, and then, taking a piece of paper out of her coat pocket, she acted a pantomime, with the crudeness of a hack actress, to show that she had an address written on it. She tore up the scrap into tiny bits and scattered them to the wind. Her heart was beating calmly and evenly now, her painted lips were smiling arrogantly and condescendingly: that's how Aglaya would have smiled in a similar situation, she thought.

Both the men followed her.

Walking with a brisk, smart step she came out into Lenin Street, and suddenly remembered a silent film she had seen in Petrograd in her early parlourmaid days, at a cinema called the Parisienne, it was a curiously blue-tinted film and it was all about detectives and fleeing criminals, false trails and planted clues. There was a tousle-haired young man pounding on the piano, and on the bluish screen were men in bowlers and top hats running after each other with funny jerky steps.

She stopped in front of a billboard, that had reminded her of the Parisienne, and with a glance at the famous German singer starring in the movie, wrote two figures on it—9 and 14. The flatfoots saw her writing; one of them hurried after her, the other stopped to gape into the star's enormous, smiling mouth, and Alevtina, grinning happily because everything was going so well, turned into a small perfumery shop, opened just recently, and dropping her voice mysteriously asked the bald-headed owner if there was any chance of getting a hundred grams of saccharine through him. She left with a meaningful smile at the frightened man, and continued on her way down Lenin Street, knowing for certain that the sleuths would be puzzled by her question about the saccharine. Indeed they were puzzled, and with every minute they became more and more convinced that they were dealing with a really dangerous partisan, a shrewd and crafty woman, and maybe even a partisan leader.

When Alevtina got to the ruins of the cathedral she pretended to notice for the first time that she was being tailed, and began to double on her tracks. She entered the gate of the former baths, which the Germans were converting into a warehouse, and lay low there, well aware that her followers were

lying low as well. And then, looking about her nervously, but acting as if she had given them the slip, she almost ran down Porechnaya Street, and stopped to give them time to hide. There were many more than two of them now. When the call came through to Merkel that she was trying to establish contact, he ordered her to be delivered to him forthwith, dead or alive, it did not matter which. Brigadenführer Merkel had no intention of indulging in any criminal investigations here. He adhered to the elementary theory of exterminating the entire human herd on enemy territory. That was the opinion he had expressed at a conference early in the Russian campaign. His orders were—to exterminate without trial.

By three in the afternoon, after writing more mysterious symbols on the billboards and orders, Alevtina felt so unbearably tired that she knew it was time to end the game. The stimulating effect of the German pep pills had worn off, she was dizzy from fatigue and there was a ringing in her ears. "She has gone far enough now," Alevtina decided. "Of course she has, she must, and so I can stop now."

She came to the ruins of the Stakhanovets Cinema. Everything was heaped with snow and broken brick, but she pretended to be looking for an entrance to a hiding place. The flatfoots and Gestapo men exchanged questioning looks—they could shoot her on the spot of course, but shouldn't they yield to the temptation of trailing her further? Naturally, they wouldn't let her get away, but supposing there were others down below?

Alevtina slipped, and with a gasp rolled down into a dark, endless basement, under the twisted and buckled steel supports. Her head was spinning faster and faster, but still she found the strength to call out in a loud voice:

"Comrade Rodion, are you there?"

After a pause she said more quietly, but loud enough for her pursuers to hear: "Everything's all right, comrades."

And then she felt faint, she must have hurt herself falling into the pit, or perhaps it was because the end was so near. She was no longer able to imagine it was a sequel to that detective film of long ago, she was no longer able to rejoice in leading the Germans such a merry dance, or to invent any more tricks.

And the horror of her loneliness gripped her throat.

It was there, in the darkness, that the Gestapo men seized her.

There were many of them. They lighted their way with flashlights, jabbed the muzzles of their submachine-guns into

every nook and cranny, searching for "Comrade Rodion" and others, and then, in exasperation, began to beat Alevtina to make her tell them where the other people were hiding. But she told them nothing, she tried to protect her head with her hands, and an anguished thought came to her that they would simply beat her to death there and then and no one would know.

At last they dragged her outside—unconscious, mangled, but still alive—and then, in front of the Stakhanovets Cinema, in the waning light of a frosty February day, Lance-Corporal Krautz, the Frizland bull, took a good look at her and declared that she was not the Bolshevik woman they wanted. This was not the woman who had demanded her suit length back from him, that one he would know anywhere. The flatfoots flinched—they would have to answer for this. And only the Gestapo soldiers who had just arrived from Berlin cracked jokes and laughed as they nonchalantly lit their cigarettes. The whole bloody mess was not one of their worries.

At 10 p.m. Alevtina was brought to the Brigadenführer.

The huge, thin man, sallow-skinned and bony, stood in the centre of the room, once the office of the late Standartenführer, the late colonel, the late von Zanke, the late Knight of the Iron Cross with the oak leaves. Sweat was rolling down Merkel's expressionless face. He had just spoken on a direct line to the Reichsleiter himself. Merkel's chest was hung with well-earned, shining, gleaming, sweetly clinking and tinkling medals, which Reichsleiter Göring had just sworn he'd strip him of if he didn't clear things up at once.

"Ustimenko?" Merkel demanded sharply. He did not know anything yet, for the simple reason that no one had dared report the truth. "Are you Ustimenko? Answer!"

"I'm Ustimenko!" Alevtina shouted in a quivering, exulting voice. "I am Ustimenko! I am a Communist! And I'll never tell you bastards anything! You can rot in hell! Long live our Soviet Motherland! Death to the fascist invaders! Death to you! I, too, am fearless, I'm no worse than anyone else. I'm not afraid of you, and I . . ."

She had more to shout in their faces, but they did not give her a chance: a blue flame scorched her bruised, bleeding face, and she fell forward with a bullet between the eyes. Brigadenführer Merkel had always been known as an excellent shot, especially at close range.



Chapter 7

It's Harder Here Than There

He had a dream that was so childish, so remote, that in his sleep he felt sorry for himself. He dreamt that his Aunt Aglaya was pushing her cool hand under his head, as she used to do when he had to be wakened early for school or the institute after sitting up late the night before. He dreamt that she was tugging at his ear gently and whispering, bent low over him: "Wake up, you funny giraffe! Get up, Volodya dear. It's time to get up, my darling boy, it's time, my sweet..."

He did not want to wake up, he was awfully sleepy, and drowsily he said to himself: never mind, I can sleep a little longer, auntie's here, everything will be all right, she won't let me oversleep.

"Aren't you ever going to wake up, child?"

He woke up.

Aunt Aglaya was there, sitting beside his bed. She had on a yellow hospital robe, and her hand was pushed under his head, as in those faraway days of his childhood and adolescence.

"You?" he whispered.

"It's me, darling," she whispered back, her face close to his.

"It's me, son, my own dear son. . . ."

She had never called him that before. And he, who had no memories of his mother, suddenly appreciated the word with a sweetly nostalgic feeling, and pulling his aunt close to him, began to kiss her on the temple, on the bridge of her nose, on her small ear and her flushed cheek, while her hot, quickly rolling tears fell on his face.

"Let me go!" she pleaded. "You're squeezing the life out of me! Come on, let go, Volodya!"

He let her go, and she, brushing the hair back from his forehead, gazed into his face, long and earnestly, as though she could not quite believe that this was really he. Tears still glistened in her black eyes, making them bigger and brighter than they really were.

"You need a shave, you've let yourself go. Aren't you ashamed of yourself?"

"Nagging already? Starting right in?" Volodya asked with a happy smile.

"You need a haircut too," Aglaya continued, holding his hand in both of hers. "You haven't begun to fight yet, but you're the 'lost generation' already! I've read about that sort. They drink brandy and smoke an awful lot. They take a new mistress every other minute, but they have their one and only love who doesn't quite understand them for some reason. Right, Volodya dear? Have you taken to brandy yet?"

"You're an aunt out of this world," Volodya said. "Aunts are a bore as a rule. D'you want to bet that not a man in this ward will believe that you're my aunt? I say, comrades!" he said loudly. "Dear friends!"

But there was no one there. According to an unwritten law of hospital camaraderie, all the walking patients usually left

the room as soon as someone's girl friend came to see him, and that's what happened now.

"See?" Volodya said triumphantly. "Get it? If it's an aunt or a grandmother, they never budge. So that's the kind of aunt I've got! Why are you wearing this hospital robe? Are you a patient here, too? Were you wounded? Or are you ill? You did get my letters all right, didn't you? Now, tell me everything, and begin from the beginning. Look, I'll put on something and we'll go out into the corridor, there's a sofa we can sit on and we're allowed to smoke there. You don't have to rush away, do you?"

"No, I don't have to rush away," she said slowly. "I've all the time in the world."

And there, sitting on the sofa with its badly worn sky-blue satin cover, Aglaya gave her nephew a calm and detailed account of her detainment in the Gestapo, Group "C". She told him about Wenzlow and the old fox von Zanke, about the resurrection and death of the old accountant Averyanov, about Tatyana Okayomova—her and Volodya's enemy, who in spite of everything had not given her away. She told him about Postnikov's heroic death, about the now late Professor Ganichev, and, finally, about Alevtina Andreyevna, Varya's mother, to whom, she said, she owed her life.

Volodya sat perfectly still, his unseeing gaze on the window beyond which the darkness of a near-spring night was slowly gathering.

"And Zhovtyak, what of him?" he asked quietly.

Aglaya told him. Volodya nodded, apparently little surprised. After hearing the story of Alevtina's death, he no longer seemed to be listening to what Aglaya was saying. He just sat there pressing the palms of his big hands together, biting his lips, and staring fixedly at the window, over which the blackout curtain had not yet been drawn, absorbed, it seemed, by what he saw there.

"Well, and what about the explosives?" he asked suddenly.

"Oh, that was all right," Aglaya answered him. "We got them all right, of course. But we had to pay dearly for them, Volodya."

"Bogoslovsky's wife, you mean?"

"Both his wife and his daughter. Your Bogoslovsky has lost all he had in the world. He's got no one."

"So the fascists killed them?"

"Supposedly when they attempted to escape."

"Are you really sure?"

"Yes, Volodya."

His face was yellow and haggard, and there was a bitter, tortured bewilderment in his eyes. Aglaya stroked his shoulder as she talked. He was her only listener at first, but little by little a small crowd of men gathered round the sofa. When she told him about Ogurtsov, Volodya shuddered. More and more people came up, and in the silence Aglaya told them about the blasting of the casino, and about the coffins filled with rubble. . . .

"What town was this in?" someone asked in a high singsong voice.

"In a town temporarily occupied by the enemy," she replied coolly, and her slightly slanting eyes looked at the speaker firmly and a bit mockingly, as if to say: don't ask what you're not supposed to ask, young man.

She also told them about the arrival of Merkel, about the mass executions, and about the nazi troop trains that were being derailed and blown up.

"So no matter what happens, there's no crushing our people, is there?" asked the same tenor voice, but now it rang with admiration and delight. "Even there, in occupied territory?"

"Never. They haven't a chance." Aglaya said, and now she looked with tenderness at this youngster in his much too small pyjamas who kept inching closer and closer to her. "The fascists see no submissiveness anywhere, nor will they ever see it."

The corridor suddenly seemed stuffy, and Emelyanov, Volodya's pilot friend, hobbled to the window with his badly fitted artificial leg slipping on the hardwood floor, and pushed the panes wide open. In the frosty April dusk they heard the peaceful clanking of the tramway bells, the hooting of automobile horns, and the excited squeals of children sledding down the ice-run near the hospital. Everyone listened pensively, and in the silence Aglaya asked someone to give her a cigarette. Dozens of hands held out packets and cases.

"I didn't know you smoked?" Volodya said, surprised.

"I don't. It's just to while away the time, as old Mefody used to say: 'Sheer cussedness!'" she made it sound just like the old man.

Everyone was silent. The only audible sounds were those of Moscow's calmly pulsating life.

"You should give a talk about this," said Smetannikov from Ward 9, a dull and everlastingly disgruntled man. "In the conference room, so everyone here could attend."

"A talk would be difficult," she answered thoughtfully. "You see, it's not like recounting someone else's experiences, I've been through all this myself."

Her firm lips quivered, she gripped Volodya's wrist hard, and turned away. He signalled the others with his eyes to leave the two of them alone. Now it was his turn to stroke his aunt's shoulder. She did not weep or sob, she merely kept jerking and shaking her small proud head. Emelyanov brought her some heart drops in a medicine glass, and a little later some weak hospital tea. Aglaya drank first the one and then the other, smiled and begged them not to judge her too severely: after all, she was there for psychiatric treatment. True, she did not have these spells very often, and placing her in hospital had been more an act of kind consideration than necessity.

"Your diet mustn't be restricted to wartime rations," Emelyanov told her seriously. "Vitamin C, pork fat, there's nothing like it for nervous diseases. See how thin you are!"

"Pork fat is a wonderful thing, of course," Aglaya replied pensively. "It's excellent."

But it was obvious that her thoughts were miles away, and Emelyanov, suddenly feeling embarrassed, left them.

"Yes, Volodya dear, I've caused you pain, I know," she said softly.

"Pain is not the word," he said.

"No, it isn't. You can't find the right words, dearest. I only know one thing: they flew me here practically by force, and I'm finding it harder here than there, immeasurably harder. Do you know what I mean?"

He nodded.

"There I'd be making my contribution to the cause of liberation, in a tiny measure, infinitely tiny—you must forgive me the highfalutin style—but here I'm just a liability. . . ."

"You, a liability?"

"What else?"

"Then what does it make me?"

She looked at him quickly. There was a passion of misery in his eyes, and all at once she realised that he had taken her account as a rebuke to his submission to illness, and that her words about being a liability had dealt him the last crushing blow.

"No, Volodya, no!" she cried in alarm.

"What, Auntie dear?" he asked calmly.

And feeling both tenderness and distress, she understood that it was senseless arguing with him or raising any objections, just as senseless as arguing with her would have been were she in his place, or with her brother Afanasy, if he had lived. He took what she told them not simply as a story of tortures suffered by people in enemy occupied territory, but as an accusation against him for inactivity, submission to objective circumstances, and moral inertness, which he hated so vehemently.

"Volodya," she tried again. "Volodya dear, I had a talk with your doctors before waking you, you know. You're ill, you mustn't even think of. . . ."

He was watching her gravely and a bit sadly.

"So, I mustn't even think!" he said with a grim smile. "Mine's a piffling sort of illness, Aunt dear, it will pass by itself. . . ."

"Yes, but the doctors. . . ."

"Incidentally, I'm a doctor myself, Aunt, and not such a hopeless one really. . . ."

"Throw it out of your stupid head!"

"I won't."

Aglaya shrugged her shoulders angrily.

"And Postnikov?" Volodya asked abruptly. "Couldn't I have done something for him that time?"

"What time?"

"That time I met him outside the recruiting office. But, of course, you don't know. . . ."

"And I shall never know," Aglaya thought sadly. "Will this character ever tell me? No, I'll never know now, the stupid woman that I am!"

"What's worrying you, Volodya?" she asked him.

"All sorts of things," he answered wearily. "As a matter of fact, all this business of deep thinking is sheer rot. Ganichev and Polunin did a lot of thinking about Zhovtyak, and he went and got himself appointed Bürgermeister! It's a disgusting habit, deep thinking is. . . ."

"Hold your horses, child," Aglaya said with a tender smile. "You're getting carried away. . . ."

Hugging herself with her hands inside the wide sleeves of her robe she got up to go. Volodya went with her to Block 3 where nervous cases were treated. The hospital court was slippery and dark, the sky over Moscow was studded with brightly shining stars, and from above came the comforting sound of fighter planes guarding the capital. Volodya took his

aunt's arm with a strong protective hold, and she suddenly admitted, as if surprised at her discovery: "I missed you terribly, my dear."

"Go on!"

"And did you ever think about me?"

"Naturally," said Volodya. "How could I help thinking about you? No one in the world has ever had an aunt like you."

"No letters from Ginger?" he asked quickly.

"I got one just recently, after all those adventures of mine, but it's quite old, it was written in August. I received it at the same time as your two. And there was also a letter from Rodion."

Volodya did not say anything.

"Rodion's fighting, he's commanding a flotilla from what I can gather," said Aglaya and paused, waiting for him to ask about Varya's letter. Surely, he must ask. But he didn't. And so she added. "He's alive and well, Rodion is."

They got to Block 3 and stopped before the front door. There was a small blue lamp burning above it.

"This is where we live," she said, grimacing. "We just live here and do nothing. Drop in some time. . . ."

"I will."

"Volodya, you still love her," she said, raising her eyes to his. "You do love her, don't you?"

"So what?" he asked, bristling.

"Oh, stop that. You'll marry her anyway sooner or later. So don't torture yourself or her. Find her and marry her. Better sooner than later. . . ."

"No time like the present for courting!" he said with a sneer. "To get involved in explanations and go courting!"

"A stupid tormentor, that's what you are," Aglaya exclaimed, and Volodya knew that she was angry. "You really are the rigorist they used to call you. Try to understand that firing and attacks are not all there is in wartime. You love her, so how can you talk like that. . . ."

"Drop it," he cut her short. "What's the use of saying all those things, aunt dear. To each his own. That's the way I'm made. Get well quickly and come over to see me often. . . ."

"Well, bye-bye," she sighed.

Placing her palms lightly on his shoulders, she raised herself on tiptoe and kissed him on the cheek. At that moment the front door opened and a corpulent man in a white doctor's coat and cap came out.

"What's going on here?" he demanded sternly.

"This is my nephew," Aglaya answered, giggling. "Mayn't an aunt kiss her nephew, doctor?"

The corpulent man in the white coat came closer, flashed his pocket light into their faces, and turned away, grumbling: "You needn't take me for an idiot. Go back to your wards at once!"

"You've got quite an aunt," Kostyukevich, the engineer who had the bed next to Volodya's, said to him when he returned. "She's a remarkable person."

Volodya hung up his robe, ate his potato salad and drank his lukewarm tea. The thought of Postnikov was haunting him, Postnikov defending his patients with a revolver, Postnikov riddled by the fascists' bullets, Postnikov whom he did not take away with him, did not talk into going away with him. Oh, cursed be that day, the worst day in his, Volodya's, life. . . .

He sat on the bed in his striped pyjamas, rocking from side to side, groaning a little as from a mean, nagging toothache, and relentlessly taking stock of himself, trying to find the answer: why did he not make an effort to find Ganichev and take him out of town to Aglaya at whatever cost? And Ogurtsov? Volodya had him on his conscience too, that is if he had a conscience, if he had a right to use that concept at all. And Alevtina, Varya's mother? It never occurred to him to stop in at her place for a minute, and yet he'd have been the last one of their world to do it! He wouldn't stoop to her, would he? He didn't like her cactuses? Her Dodik made him sick, did he? But maybe, Comrade Ustimenko, it was because you were scared of the bombing and strafing? Maybe all those considerations you indulged in at the time were just a cover for your cowardice, your lousy cowardice and nothing else?

He gasped and shook his head. No, it wasn't cowardice. It was snobbery, plain and simple. He was the most important person in this life. His military career would determine the success of all battles and campaigns. The main thing was to get himself a commission, the rest did not matter. What did Postnikov matter? And Professor Ganichev? Who cared about Alevtina, a vulgar philistine? And when it came to the point, when their worth was tested in action, what was he and what were they? Was he capable of doing what they had done even in an infinitesimally small measure? Would he have fired at men who did not threaten him personally but only his patients?

No, he wasn't capable of much.

He could lie in a hospital bed, that much he could do, and with an easy mind, or an almost easy mind and chat with the Young Pioneers who came to visit front-line fighters. He could also share with these kids in the red ties his almost forgotten battle episodes; none but the children would he ever venture to tell about the raid of the Death to Fascism detachment. So what have you done, Vladimir Ustimenko, a surgeon of some experience, that makes you think you have the right to look people straight in the face?

Shuffling along in his bedroom slippers, looking gaunt and tousled, and clutching the robe he had thrown over his shoulders, he knocked on the door of the doctor's room, walked in and sat down without being invited.

"I must ask you to discharge me tomorrow," he said without preamble.

The doctor put his newspaper aside, looked at Volodya rather kindly over the rim of his spectacles, and yawned.

"I see. You want to be discharged," he said.

"Yes, I do."

"Want to join the ranks?"

Volodya did not answer, nor did he look at the doctor.

"My dear Vladimir Afanasyevich, you are a doctor yourself. And yet this is not the first time that you've confronted me with an ultimatum. It's absurd, really, I've seen your analysis today. . . ."

"I know people with a much higher albumin content who're out fighting."

"If it is so, it's most regrettable."

"I can't, you've got to understand, I simply can't. . . ."

"Well, I can't either," said the doctor, picking up his newspaper to show that the conversation was over. "I can't, my dear boy, you mustn't mind. Go back to bed now, I'll tell the nurse to give you a sedative."

When Volodya got back to his room he found Kostyukevich still wide awake, reading *War and Peace*. The light of the bedside lamp fell on his fine, distinguished face with the very black, arched eyebrows.

"Listen, Andrei," Volodya said in a loud whisper, sitting down on his bed. "Will you do me a favour?"

"Yes, sure," replied Kostyukevich, obviously relishing one of Tolstoy's passages, and paying little attention to what Volodya was saying.

"A big favour. . ."

Stumbling over the words in his haste and excitement, Volodya told him his plan, or a general idea of it, because he hadn't really worked it out yet.

"All right, I get it, but just you listen to this," Kostyukevich interrupted him, and settling down more comfortably in his bed prepared to read him an extract, but Volodya went on.

"I'll listen, but you must answer me first."

"But I did answer—with pleasure."

"You answered without really understanding. It'll take a long time. Not just a day or two. Dull work, too. You're to provide the specimens for my analyses."

"For purposes of research?"

"No, it's got nothing to do with research. It's for the purpose of getting me out of here. The thing is, that kidneys discharging. . ."

"But I told you it's all right, what's it to me, I've plenty," Kostyukevich broke in, irritably now. "I can provide the whole ward if necessary. Only don't blame me if you die afterwards. And now listen!"

In a whisper he read to Volodya the famous scene following Petya Rostov's death when Dolokhov ordered the cossacks not to take prisoners.

"Denisov did not reply; he went up to Petya, got off his horse and with trembling hands turned over the blood-stained, mud-spattered face that was already turning white.

"'I'm fond of sweet things. They are capital raisins, take them all,' came into his mind. And the cossacks looked round in surprise at the sound like the bark of a dog that Denisov uttered as he turned away, walked to the fence and clutched at it."

"Well?" he asked. "That's the sort of leaflets we should write. . ."

Volodya said nothing. Kostyukevich sat up and saw that tears were trickling down Ustimenko's face.

Three Letters

Letter one

Dear, darling Aglaya Petrovna,

I gathered from my father's very laconic letter, you know his style of letter-writing, that you are in hospital. Were you wounded?

I wanted to ask for leave, if only for a few days, to see you in Moscow, but then I was ashamed to ask, you'll understand this. We're terribly busy just now, and I've a responsible job—I'm a messenger, and it's no small task. D'you know what it is? We, messengers, work in the blood-bank service. Our job is to deliver blood wherever it is needed. As a rule it is needed where the fighting is, and when there's fighting the roads are usually both machine-gunned and bombed, but blood can't wait, or rather they can't wait for it, and so we, messengers, can't "cry for Mummy" as a certain person you know, Volodya Us-timenko by name, is fond of saying. And so we just suffer all sorts of frights, lugging our cases along the war roads. Lately I've even learned to ride. I've been given a nice old mare, docile, furry and fat, and she and I go jogging along our muddy roads. It's white nights now, so there's even no darkness to hide behind.

I get terribly scared, don't hate me for writing this.

The boulders, the swamps, the ecrie mist, and the machine-guns spitting fire. And it's all aimed at me—Varya Stepanova—at me and my suitcase with the flasks of blood. As one of our soldiers said when they were amputating his arm: "It's hardest the first couple of times."

Have you no news at all about my mother?

From father's letter I got a feeling that he knows something.

Please write me all you know, something tells me she's in trouble, my Mummy.

I get Yevgeny's epistles regularly. He's all right, he's actually planning to go somewhere and present his Cand. Sc. thesis.

How is Volodya? I don't know anything about him. Is he still abroad? If you don't mind doing it, please send me his letters to read. It's plain curiosity, after all we were very friendly once.

You know, perhaps, that I'm not an actress any more. I've given the idea away. And I've learnt a lot in this war already. People now call me "sister"—it's the most beautiful word I know. The other day I was pulling a wounded man's boot off, he would not let me, and then he said: "Leave it on, sister, to hell with it, my feet are dirty, it's not nice. . . ."

By the way, I was this man's blood donor. My blood group is O, you see, and he, this wounded man, was almost a "goner" as we say here. Well, they put him on one stretcher and me on another, and everything went off all right. Only I felt terribly

weak afterwards. They took a lot from me, four hundred cc or something. I was dead tired, besides. And then in the morning they brought in Major Kozyrev, as a matter of fact he's already a lieutenant-colonel. He's a sapper. An old friend. Our doctor, Mikhail Ivanovich Rusakov, came to me and said: here's the situation, Varya, we'll have to borrow some more of your blood, but don't let it get you down. There's nothing to be frightened about, he said, we'll fill you up with physiological salt solution. To be quite honest, I no longer cared, I could hardly think straight by then. "All right," I told him, "help yourself. I don't give a damn." He actually winced, our doctor did, and said: "Tut, tut, Varya, what vulgar talk is this?"

They're both alive and kicking now—the soldier and Kozyrev. And Kozyrev's sappers keep plying me with all kinds of biscuits and other cats from his supplementary ration so I'd get my blood back. So at the moment I'm on a sort of rest-cure.

And that's why I have the time to write you.

I've been through everything, I've seen everything, dear Aglaya Petrovna. I carried the wounded to the second post, I crawled and hauled the wounded along on my greatcoat if there was nothing else. By and large it's back-breaking work, you've got to be as strong as a horse for it, you get such pains in the small of your back that you want to groan. I was also used as a sort of rake, searching for the wounded. The thing is, that you can easily lose your wounded here, the place is so wild—hummocks, marshes, snags of every variety, boulders and whatnot. And so we circled the area where, say, a regiment of ours had fought and moved on. Very simple and efficient.

The tone of my letter shocks you a bit, doesn't it?

I've got the blues, I don't know why. Shall I make you laugh and tell you a funny thing that happened to us in the bathhouse in early spring? When I'm feeling low, I recall this story and sometimes it helps. Maybe you'll smile, too?

Well, off we went to the bathhouse—our famous theatre sister Anna Markovna, who's awfully fat and wears men's underwear, and we three "blood messengers" Kapa, Tassya and I. Our Tassya is awfully pretty, you want to look at her all the time, she's tall and long-legged, nothing like poor sprawling me.

Our bathhouse is not in a dugout, it's in a sort of shed. It's half-shed, half-house. Well, we took our clothes off and started splashing Anna Markovna with hot water, making a terrible row. Kapa got scalded and yelled to the soldier outside who's

in charge of our bathhouse. "Hey, Rassulov!" she yelled. "Turn off the heat! Are you crazy or what?"

Things were better after that, the temperature of the water was normal, we washed our hair and discussed each other's figures. The supreme judge was Anna Markovna, of course: Tassya's legs were too long, my feet were too small, Kapa's shoulders sloped too much.

"Take a look at me," said Anna Markovna, posing like a statue.

We called a council and pronounced our verdict: you must slim down a bit, we told her, your curves are too voluptuous, like a Rubens painting.

Suddenly there was a roaring and a wailing. Anna Markovna got down on all fours and hopped into a corner. We darted after her.

"It's an air raid, girls," Tassya told us.

And then it whanged again! Chips of wood flew around, bricks tumbled down, a sheet of iron came loose. There was smoke and fire, boiling water gushed from the pipe, and Anna Markovna screamed: "To the foxholes, girls!"

And all of us stark naked, and snow falling outside. And all our clothes gone, buried under the rubble. Can you picture it? Tassya had pried the door open in the meantime, and was rushing down the street—steam simply pouring from her. Anna Markovna followed her, making short spurts, hopping like a frog. She was holding a wash basin over her head for protection.

Next, Kapa jumped out, and then I—wrapped in a bath towel, like a ghost.

We couldn't think or see straight, of course.

The plane had long since disappeared. Everyone nearly died laughing, and we nearly died of shame. We leapt into the snow, into the foxholes, stark naked, you know.

Anna Markovna remarked philosophically:

"What's so funny about it? Women, I've heard, succumb to mass psychosis very easily when they've no men with them. In this case it was a mass psychosis of fear. And the psychosis affected everyone without exception."

Not funny?

Didn't you think this story amusing at all?

If you only knew how sick I am at heart!

I'll finish now. Kozyrev has come, he sends you his profound

respects, and asks me to tell you that he has heard a lot about you and would be happy to meet you some day. However, he wants to write you a few lines himself, and has made me promise that I won't read what he has written.

Love and kisses to you, my dear, darling Aglaya Petrovna from

Varya.

Dear Aglaya Petrovna, two months ago, on May 23 to be precise, Varya hauled me out of a scrape, in a volokusha* the sort of scrape from which, as a rule, people don't come out alive, and I'm proud and happy to tell you about it. And so now I owe my life to Varya twice. Somewhere, sometime in peacetime I read: "If you ever need my life come and take it." These beautiful and powerful words I address to Varya, the finest person of all the people I have ever met on the roads of war.

Sincerely yours,
Lt.-Col. Kozyrev.

Letter two

My dear wife,

The comrade who brings you this letter and the parcel is Lieutenant Zvyagintsev, commander of the destroyer *Seryozny*, which was my flagship. At the moment, his ship is undergoing repairs, and Comrade Zvyagintsev is on his way to Kazan where he will spend his short leave with his family. Be nice to him, he has suffered a personal loss—his mother has just died. The parcel contains my supplementary ration, and you must eat it all: there's butter, tinned stuff—cod in tomato sauce, biscuits and sweets. The rest is a gift from the command, my commanding officers happened to hear about the situation you had been in, and they have ordered me to send this parcel to you. I don't know what's inside.

Lieutenant Zvyagintsev will report our news to you. He is well informed. And you can trust him entirely. He is a comrade tried and tested in battle, a strong-willed commander. I'm no good at describing fighting episodes, I simply want to assure you of one thing—I'm doing my best to serve the Soviet Union and be worthy of a wife like you. Forgive me, if I've worded it awkwardly.

* *Volokusha*—a light wooden contraption shaped like a flat-bottomed boat, hauled along the snow by hand.—Tr.

Alevtina's death and her heroic behaviour under the heel of the cursed occupants astounded me. Words actually fail me to describe to you what I feel.

As for the teacher Comrade Okayomova, and the accountant Averyanov, this, on the contrary does not surprise me at all. We judge people too superficially sometimes, and let their trifling faults conceal their essential selves from us. I've had it brought home to me again and again in my line of duty.

And now, my dear wife, explain this riddle for me: the other day I received a visit from a very good-looking young woman, a Surgeon Captain, Vera Nikolayevna Veresova by name, who told me she had a big and very important favour to ask of me which concerned a certain medical officer who was well-known to me—Vladimir Afanasyevich Ustimenko. I was naturally very glad to get news of Volodya. She described the march of their partisan detachment, placing Volodya in a very handsome light, which also made me very glad, of course, but I'd never have expected any other behaviour from him. Then Comrade Veresova went on to tell me about the kidney disease he had developed during the march, and in the course of conversation announced that she trusted I would help in the matter of getting Volodya assigned to our fleet for subsequent service. When I asked her if Comrade Ustimenko himself wanted it so, Comrade Veresova replied evasively, and I was too polite to insist. She then told me that she had already had a talk about it with Comrade Mordvinov, Fleet Medical Officer, and also with Fleet Surgeon Major-General Professor Kharlamov. They seemed to have no objections but it would be a good thing if I "gave the matter a push". I naturally told her that I haven't been taught how to "push". Perhaps it was rude of me, but I couldn't help myself. So, please, my dear wife, write and tell me what it is all about and what Volodya himself has to say on this subject.

Get well and strong quickly.

I kiss you.

Your ever loving Rodion Stepanov.

Letter three

My aunt, my darling aunt!

The condescendingly sarcastic tone of your letter tells me you have forgiven me. One thing you don't know is that I tried

to see you as soon as I was discharged, but there were some specialists making the rounds of the wards just then, and they didn't let me in. But I was pressed for time, as speechmakers like to say. Besides I was afraid they'd grab me and lock me up again, because your nephew left the hospital still "under suspicion". Only please don't worry—I'm all right and I feel fine.

I'm glad that Varya is finding happiness. I've no intention of writing to her on the subject. If it's Kozyrev, let it be Kozyrev. I've got nothing to do with this at all. I know she is a good scout, I always knew it and never doubted her integrity for a moment, but I also know that we have parted company for good, there's nothing one can do about it, auntie dear. The blame is entirely mine, of course, mine and no one else's, but then I've no intention of blaming anyone anyway. So let's write finis to all this. And let's never go back to what's been decided once and for all.

Now let me tell you how I was met here by my new chief—Surgeon Major Ashkhen Ovanesovna Oganyan. If you want to know what she looks like just call up a mental picture of an ordinary witch; incidentally, she knows she looks like a witch, and even plays it up a bit.

Well, I reported to her.

"Surgeon Captain Ustimenko?"

"Yes."

"Vladimir Afanasyevich?"

"Quite right."

"Have you read Chekhov's *Ionych*?"

"I have."

"Doctors of that type happen in our time as well, don't you agree?"

"I don't."

"They don't flaunt their lucrative aims, of course, and they keep their cynicism to themselves, but they do exist. They employ different tactics and a different strategy too. In the war, their main purpose is, I think, to survive."

"I don't know any like that."

"They use connections. . . ."

"What for?"

"To survive."

This idiotic conversation went on for quite a time. Finally I told her what I thought, in the sense that *Ionych* is a type

that has vanished forever and that a recurrence is impossible in our society.

"Impossible, you say?" she demanded.

She trained her pince-nez at me, which she manipulates as if it were a double-barrelled machine-gun.

"Impossible, you say? And it's you who says it? You, on account of whom I, an old woman, was called in by Comrade Mordvinov and given to understand that certain quarters would be gratified if you—Surgeon Captain Ustimenko—were satisfied with me. You, who. . ."

You can imagine how I blew up!

I suppose my outburst was the sort of fit the late Polunin classified rather accurately as a "chicken in hysterics". I can't remember any of the things I yelled, all I do remember distinctly is our old lady No. 2—Zinaida Mikhailovna Bakunina, our therapist—waking up behind the partition and bringing me a spoonful of bromide. It's clear to you now, I hope, that all this dirty business of pulling strings is the handiwork of that very same good-looking Vera Nikolayevna Veresova mentioned in your husband's letter. I haven't yet had the honour of meeting this woman here, but she is here in our fleet, and when I do meet her I certainly will give her a piece of my mind! We'll have a heart-to-heart talk!

In the meantime (I know you'll understand me, aunt of mine) I'm trying to prove to the two old ladies by my every action and word that I'm neither an Ionych in the making nor an Ostap Bender, but a "decent person" as your husband likes to say. It's uphill work. Trying to prove that you are not you is a racking job at the best of times, and my case it's just terrible, knowing what my two ladies are like.

What are they like?

Ashkhen—the No. 1—has a very dry manner. She's stern, a woman of few words, but behind her stiffness and cool civility, behind her pince-nez which she holds and peers through at you, her clipped voice and her really mannish manners, only a dull-witted fool could fail to see a heart brimming with genuine kindness and understanding, the heart of a doctor blessed with a divine spark, forgive the gush, auntie, like Bogoslovsky or the late Postnikov.

She hasn't a soul in the world. It so happened that she is a spinster, she never had a husband or a child, she's never known and she does not know even now, in her old age, what it means

to live for one's own self, and even though she demands no self-sacrificing of anyone, no one working under her would do a poor or middling job, not below his personal capabilities anyway. My No. 1 lady is absolutely merciless and pitiless to people who do not pull their weight. And those who try their hardest she either takes no notice of, because that's how people should work in her opinion, or tells them occasionally, not without malice, that there's a war on and the trade union collective agreement on the eight-hour working day is invalid.

My old lady No. 2 is the meekest and sweetest of creatures, a small and skinny little thing, an excellent therapist but absolutely unsure of herself, the sort who puts all her diagnoses in the form of a query. She adores Ashkhen, their friendship dating back to the days of the civil war. They met on board an armoured train or something, and there Zinaida fell desperately in love with the commander or whoever he was, to which Ashkhen still refers occasionally, saying archly and enigmatically: "Your well-known recklessness, Zina dear!"

But she does wear a wedding ring on her finger. And she blushes. How she blushes, auntie!

This is what Ashkhen told me about her:

"Zina was very poor and very hungry, always. Her father—a privy counsellor—disowned her, but when she made her threat good and ran away to school, he went so far as to put the police on her track to bring her back. But then she ran away again, and not because she wanted to become a famous doctor. She didn't have the makings of a celebrity anyway. All she wanted was to be useful. And straight from the Sorbonne she went to Mordovia to be a country doctor. The village policeman was disrespectful to her because she was under surveillance, the peasants had the leech treat them for lues, and poor Zina had no firewood to keep her cottage warm. And she had no friends at court either, such as you have, for instance, none at all!"

Can you imagine how awful it was for me to listen to all that? And there was Ionych again. Or take a conversation like this, for instance:

Ashkhen: Do you still insist that the Ionych breed is extinct in our country?

I: Yes, I do.

Zina: You're very stubborn, Vladimir Afanasyevich.

Ashkhen: If one wishes our Soviet society well one must not overlook its faults and flatter it. The Ionych breed does exist.

Chekhov was an exceptionally good doctor and he had foresight. You, for instance, are a young Ionych. . . .

I: What, Ionych again?

Zina: Look at this young man! He's actually surprised!

Ashkhen: What is the time?

I: I'm sorry, I overslept. But I. . . .

Ashkhen: I suppose, Zina dear, that Ionych's moral decline also began with his coming late to his hospital. He had no real interests there, as a matter of fact he had no interests at all, he simply amused himself by counting his money. . . .

Zina: Clipping his coupons. . . .

I: I fail to see the link between my coming late and the clipping of coupons. . . .

Ashkhen: And why don't you take more care with your appearance, Captain Ustimenko? You're a disgrace. Couldn't be bothered to shave even. You're wearing a crumpled coat all creased and untidy. Surely you might have polished your boots at least?

I: (In another fit of "chicken's hysterics"—boastfully, shamelessly, disgustingly, which honestly isn't like me.) Oh, all right, I'm rotten all round. I'm an Ionych whose influential connections have wangled this appointment for him. My main purpose is to survive. Now it's your turn to listen to what I've been through. . . .

Ashkhen: Did you hear, Zina dear, he's been through something!

Zina: Maybe we'd better hear him out Ashkhen. He's so keyed up. And see how ill he looks. He's even a bit cyanotic. . . .

I: You can keep your pity. It was you who sent me to the regimental station, and it was there that. . . .

And I went on to tell them just what happened there.

The story is rather curious, auntie.

Imagine a group of our sailors, who are now in the marines, coming up the road. And among them a wounded but cheerful bloke, walking unassisted and shouting loudly, to right and left:

"Keep away, I'll blow up! Disperse, I'm blowing up! Don't come near me or you'll endanger your life! Come on, fetch the doctors and the sapper. . . ."

I went up to the sailor. He had obviously had a good stiff drink to keep up his courage and spirits. His name was Sashka Dyakonov, I afterwards found out, a scout from the famous unit of Captain Leontyev. He'd been given the drink after the

event. And the event, as told me by the men escorting him, was this: a 50-mm mortar shell hit Sashka, got stuck in his shoulder and did not explode. It was liable to go off any minute, the shell had a plastic percussion cap, in short it was a tricky thing. The shell or the detonator had to be removed, but surgery alone was helpless here, a sapper had to be called in, and a pretty smart sapper at that.

Sashka, keeping his distance and trying not to gesticulate confirmed all this.

They brought him a lighted cigarette, and he smoked it standing behind a boulder so his friends wouldn't get hurt if the shell exploded.

We held a council of regimental surgeons, and while we were at it, the sapper arrived. He was one of those gloomy officers whom nothing can ever surprise or even rouse from their habitual phlegm. He came close to Sashka, examined the detonator and told us the type it was, as if that mattered. There was a "W" there, and a "9", and several a's, and other signs and things.

"Well, what about it?" I asked him.

"I can't get hold of it the way it is now," he answered. "It only just shows through the skin. You must cut away the flesh, and then we'll give its eight-fin stabiliser a little tug, and that will be that. Let the men move away so none but we three will be hurt if we make a slip and it goes off."

"Try not to make that slip, will you," said Sashka. "A sapper can only go wrong once in his life, but I'd rather not be a party to it. So, just be careful, will you."

The three of us went inside the tent. The sailors, keeping their distance, shouted warnings to Sashka:

"Look where you're going, don't trip, Sashka son!"

"Sashka, your country needs you, remember!"

"Sashka, friend, don't move a muscle!"

Well, we got there, and I made him sit down. He smiled, but it was an obvious effort. Sweat just poured down his white face. And I was well past smiling. There was that blasted eight-fin stabiliser sticking out from his shoulder, and I was supposed to cut round it without touching it.

"Be very careful, doctor," the sapper advised me. "These fifty-millimetre shells have sensitive detonators. It's liable to make a mess of us any moment."

We cut Sashka's padded jacket down the back with a razor. I never imagined it was such a tough job, cutting through a

padded jacket. After that we slit his duck jumper. The shell had gone under the skin right under his shoulder blade, and the detonator was barely showing from his armpit. I injected a good dose of novocaine into Sashka, and picked up my scalpel. Now I, too, was pouring sweat. The sapper directed the show:

"No, I can't grip it yet, my fingers are too thick, slice into his flesh a bit more, doc. Never mind the scars, at least we three will stay alive. The risk is both justified and expedient..."

At last, the little black plastic detonator was outside. And you know what the sapper said to me then?

"And now, doc, go outside," he said. "It's not expedient for a third person to be blown up, if it's possible to limit the losses to two."

He sent me out, and in a minute called me back again: the detonator had already been unscrewed, and there was my sapper friend, whose name I didn't know and probably will never know now, examining the insides of the thing with Sashka, as excited as kids, and arguing about it.

"What's that plug for?"

"Plug yourself, sailor boy. Now look and memorise it: this is an automatic firing pin..."

And there was the empty shell lying on a stool.

I stitched Sashka up and, wrong or right, gave him a big glass of the hospital's alcohol.

"I could do with some food, too" my Sashka said to me. "This adventure has whetted my appetite, comrade doctor..."

While I was putting him to bed, the sapper disappeared, taking the shell with him. Sashka's pals were waiting for me outside, behind the boulders. They had some vodka. And with all of them chanting: "Drink it up, drink it up, drink it up!" your beloved nephew, the goody-goody, got as soused as a hog. I can't remember what we bawled, sitting on those boulders, but I do remember yelling: "The Ocean is boundless and blue" with all the rest, kissing the whiskered albatrosses, going with them to see their commander, and then their commander taking me to his commander where, I believe, I solemnly pledged myself to the Navy forever.

That's why I overslept, and ended up by bragging to the two old ladies, making myself out such a wonderful hero.

D'you know what Ashkhen said after I'd told them about that shell?

"Yes, Captain Ustimenko," she said, smiling. "It's one of those cases when you can't cry for labour protection."

The story left them completely unimpressed.

But they have changed their attitude towards me slightly. I don't know, maybe they are really quite good to me, at least they've stopped calling me an Ionych. And that awful morning Ashkhen said to me:

"Let's all have breakfast together, shall we? Sit down, Ustimenko, we're going to have some tea. Palkin, Palkin, where are you, we want some good, strong tea with cranberry juice. Or perhaps with condensed milk. We want some bread too, Palkin. D'you hear me, Palkin?"

Now Palkin, I want you to know, is a crafty character with a beard like Rasputin's. He's perfectly healthy and strong, but he won't fight, you see, because he's a believer in Tolstoy's non-resistance philosophy, a Tolstoyan, he calls himself. He's a medical orderly, but he can't stand the sight of blood. He faints at the sight of a wound, and we simply can't prove that he's shamming. My old ladies are entirely dependent on him because they don't know how to light a stove, or fetch water, in fact, they don't know how to do anything except their work. And the scoundrel takes advantage of it.

"Palkin, Palkin, we want our tea!" Ashkhen called to him, "Palkin, where's the sugar? What d'you mean it's all gone, there was plenty yesterday. What do you mean it's been and gone, don't be impudent, Palkin. Oh, no one suspects you, Palkin, we're not casting any aspersions, it just seems very strange. And you say there's no milk left either?"

Oh aunt, my darling aunt, how I hate to see people like my two old ladies being swindled! It really makes my blood boil. All one must do, you know, is not give the Palkins of this world their head, and then everything will be all right. I caught up with him outside, and shouted: "Palkin, I say, Palkin!"

He stopped. But he didn't turn round. What was I to him? Just small fry, a captain. The ladies were majors, and even then he couldn't care less.

"Palkin," I said. "Stand properly!"

"Why should I stand properly? I'm not in the ranks. I don't have to stand to attention before all and sundry."

"Listen, Palkin," I said to him. "Listen to me. You will stand to attention before me. Smartly, too. You know how it's done.

I've seen you on parade when the M.D.C. came here. Attention!" I shouted.

He turned white. That's how Rasputin must have looked when Sumarokov-Elston or Purishkevich raised their hand to kill him. But he stood to attention.

"You're nothing but a malingerer and a scoundrel," I said to him then. "I've checked on you, you're not a Tolstoyan at all. You're simply a war-dodger. And a thief. A filthy wartime thief. If you ever dare to steal a lump of sugar or a grain of food from the old ladies again, I'll take you for a little stroll to the front line. You'll crawl in front of me, and I'll come behind. And if you try to stop I'll shoot you. Get me, Palkin?"

"I understand you, Comrade Captain," he replied, his white teeth chattering.

I think I've written much too much, auntie dear.

But on the whole things are not too bad. My old ladies, of course, are as busy as ever re-educating me, they find my generation wanting in moral principles. I'm a passable doctor, from their point of view, but I have bad manners (O God!). I yell at their poor Palkin who (oh, why did I have to start this knight-errant business!) would never hurt a fly, never steal anything, and is indispensable to them every waking minute. And another thing my ladies consider very bad is that I haven't got a fiancé.

"You lack a restraining influence," Ashkhen said to me one day.

"Why?" I asked, surprised.

"You have no one waiting for you anywhere. And Konstantin Simonov, the poet, said: do wait for me, do wait!"

"That's not the way he put it at all!" I objected.

Well, the long and short of it is that now I'm to have supper with them, so they can "strengthen" my moral principles and stuff me full of vitamins. It's fun sometimes, and sometimes it's a bore.

Take care of yourself.

If you hadn't hopped into marriage with Rodion, I might have easily married you myself, in view of my absence of moral principles. Unfortunately I'm your nephew, and it wouldn't be quite nice. But on the other hand, the difference in our ages is not so very great. With time I'd marry other, younger girls and with my new young wives we'd wheel you about—old and senile—in a wheelchair.

Aunt dear, write to me. You darling aunt of mine!

Vladimir.

The Old Ladies

In the middle of one of their sermons on moral principles in medicine, Palkin brought in the fleet's newspaper *On Watch*. Volodya was told to read the front page aloud from beginning to end, every single printed word, although the old ladies had already heard it all over the radio. He glanced down the page first. He always did this, and it always made Ashkhen angry.

"Well!" she shouted. "It's not fair, Ustimenko. We sit here waiting, and you're reading it for your own personal pleasure! I always knew you were selfish. . . ."

"Three hundred and thirty thousand people!" Volodya read out. "Not bad! Germany is in mourning, it's been officially proclaimed."

"We don't want your rendering of it, read what it says," Ashkhen told him. "He treats us like foolish old women, doesn't he, Zina dear? He will not deign to read it to us!"

Zina dear took a gulp of scalding tea and hastened to agree with Ashkhen.

"But good Lord, I'll be only too glad!" Volodya cried in exasperation, and moving up closer to the lamp began to read aloud: "'In the final count, the counter-offensive near* Stalingrad developed into a general offensive of the entire Soviet Army on an enormous front from Leningrad to the Sea of Azov. In the four months and twenty days since the offensive began, the Soviet Army has, fighting in the most difficult winter conditions, advanced West by 600 to 700 kilometres in certain areas, liberating towns and districts' . . ."

"Have you ever heard a sexton read in church?" Ashkhen, the Witch, asked Volodya. "You haven't?"

"No, I have not! And I won't read to you any more! You're always finding fault with me."

"You see, Volodya dear, you have no flair for anything artistic. Even I would have done much better," said Zina.

And in her thin, gentle voice she began to read about tanks and guns, armoured carriers and planes, trophy shells and aerial bombs. And Ashkhen listened, nodding her big-nosed head, and her shadow, more witch-like than Ashkhen herself, nodded on the wall of the dugout.

* Now Volgograd—Ed.

"What's that creaking noise you're making all the time?" she asked Volodya.

"There's a pistol lying about here, it's been taken apart and I want to put it together again. Is it yours?"

"Yes, it's mine," Ashkhen nodded. "I took it apart but I couldn't put it together again. I think there are lots of extra bits there."

"You think so?"

"I'm positive!"

Zina's voice quivered when she read about the turning point in the war. In the flames of the Stalingrad battle mankind saw the dawn of victory over fascism, she read. And then, what the Germans wrote in their papers: "After all it's only Stalingrad we lost, and not Breslau or Königsberg."

"Fools!" said Ashkhen. "Smug idiots! Volodya, don't you think Zina's reading is lovely? She used to recite poetry when she was a young girl, 'The Madman', it's by Apukhtin I believe, and the other one was, the 'Sakya Muni' one, you know. You've never heard it? Zina will recite it for you some day!"

She went to show him how Zina recited poetry. To do this, she made a slightly goggle-eyed, crooked-mouthed face, backed to the wall and declaimed:

*Late in the night they broke in,
'Tween us they rose in a wall,
Clawed at my head, drove their sting,
Pierced me with their sepals tall. . . .*

"Petals!" Zina prompted.

"Ha!" Ashkhen snarled ominously. "Ha!"

*Help me, O God! Where to flee?
Broken and anguished my heart,
Cornflowers stabbing at me,
How dare they taunt me and laugh. . . .*

"Impressed?" Ashkhen asked Volodya.

"I should say so," he answered. "I actually felt a bit frightened."

"I could play Othello," Ashkhen uttered emotionally. "If it was a female part, of course. And do you know, my dear Vladimir Afanasyevich, I adore the old school of acting. Theatre

is real theatre then, I love it when they hiss, wheeze and scream on the stage, and sitting in the audience you feel frightened and perhaps a little ashamed. And the way it is now, with all those chirping crickets. . . ." she waved disdainfully.

Zina thought differently.

"Oh no, Ashkhen, you mustn't say that," she objected timidly. "The Art Theatre is an unforgettable experience. All is plain and simple as life itself, and yet. . . ."

"And as dull as life itself!" cried Ashkhen. "No, no, and please don't argue, Zina, it's only good enough for high-minded barristers and innocents like you, in your early youth. Art must be tempestuous!"

And to Volodya's anguish, she struck a pose again and declaimed:

*Go away, I have a curse upon me,
I'm love's own son, by passion I am ruled,
My ruler is the urge of fleeting love.
For just one moment, heartblood will I pay,
For that one moment I will lie! Go away!
Go away!*

"See, Palkin liked it too! Did you like it, Palkin?"

"What's there to like about it," Palkin said sullenly, putting down the teapot on the table. "There's not even any sense in it, it's downright sinful. . . . And how can you, a woman no longer young. . . ."

"Palkin wants to draw us into the bosom of the church," Ashkhen said, sighing. "Or a sect. I believe you're a twister, aren't you Palkin?" And turning to Volodya said sharply: "Take more butter! Smear it thicker! Much thicker, you look awful, I won't stand for it and I will really complain to your dear aunt about you. You know what a telltale I am. . . ."

Palkin opened the door of the iron stove to put in some more firewood, and for a moment a crimson glow lighted up his Rasputin beard, his blood-red lips, white teeth and unholy Gipsy eyes. There was a whistling and a roaring in the stove-pipe, and Zina said dreamily: "I remember one day in Nice I bought three white roses. The roses there are amazing. And I placed them on Hertzen's grave. . . ."

"Here's your pistol," Volodya said to Ashkhen. "There were no extra bits and pieces whatever. Only don't take it apart yourself again."

"Have you loaded it?"

"I have."

"Then please put it in the holster, and put the holster on the shelf above my cot. I hate touching those things. Take a look at Zina's too, will you, I'm sure there're some baby mice in it, she hasn't touched it once. . . . Zina dear, butter some bread for Vladimir Afanasyevich, he doesn't know how. . . ."

After tea, Ashkhen rolled a huge cigarette, stuck it into a plexiglass cigarette holder which had an ornament with a martial-and-medical motif put on it by feldsher Mityashin, lighted it, exhaled a black cloud of smoke towards the low ceiling, and went back to the beginning of that day's conversation about the behaviour of doctors in various difficult circumstances.

"Resolution, resolution and once again resolution!" Ashkhen declared, drawing her brows together wrathfully. "Take the extraordinary case of the famous paediatrist Rauhfus: the parents flatly refused to let him perform a tracheotomy on their child. Rauhfus ordered his assistants to bind the parents hand and foot, and, of course, saved the child's life. An idiot of a lawyer, addressing the St. Petersburg Lawyers Association, qualified Rauhfus's conduct as a double crime: depriving the parents of freedom of movement, and inflicting bodily harm on the child. Have you ever heard anything to equal this?"

"Idiots are neither sown nor reaped," said Volodya. "I've read that some professors from the Paris medical faculty, and in our day and age mind you, deplored the treatment of syphilis most indignantly. They argued that it was 'immoral leaving people thus free to indulge in depravity'. I'm not making any mistake, I have a good memory. . . ."

He held Zina's "TT" away from him and clicked the trigger.

"Careful!" Ashkhen begged him. "Why do all little boys love to play at soldiers?"

"But there's a war on!" Volodya replied calmly. "Don't you remember?"

"You're being impudent!" said Ashkhen. And turned to a subject which never stopped worrying her—she called it "diagnostic luxuries". The young generation of physicians, she asserted, did not really know how to examine a patient, they relied entirely on laboratory and instrumental methods of examination, and as a result of this pampering their senses became dulled, their sight lost its keenness, and their sense of smell was hardly ever used. . . .

"Yes, yes, exactly," Zina nodded, shuffling her cards for a game of solitaire. "I quite agree. Professor Besser was perfectly right when he said that a small-pox patient smelt like a sweating goose."

"How should I know what a sweating goose smells like?" Volodya countered. "We were never taught anything like that. And what for. . ."

But as usual, the two old ladies did not let him finish. After all, they were his mentors and advisers, they wanted to impart their thoughts, feelings and experiences to him. Exchanging what they believed were enigmatic glances, they spoke to him as Makarenko must have spoken to his juvenile delinquents; they had their own methods of influencing him; they considered him stubborn and very touchy, and used a special "approach" to him which was a little like that used towards mental cases. And suddenly he understood everything: neither of them had ever had any children, that was it! And here, in the Arctic Circle they had found a son to care for. . . .

"Eat more vitamins!" ordered one of them.

"Drink your pine infusion!" the other told him.

"You'll ruin your eyesight reading in this poor light!" grumbled Ashkhen. "Remember you're a surgeon, you need good eyes."

"Don't put so much pepper in your soup!" Zina begged in a thin voice. "Think of your health!"

"Must you smoke?"

"I believe you've been drinking vodka, Captain Ustimenko?"

"You mustn't take too much bicarbonate of soda, it leaches your stomach."

"Why is your face so grey?"

"Have you written to your aunt?"

"Isn't it time you did something about your kidneys?"

At one time they were determined to make him marry some one, but that period was safely past, thank God. Zina, widowed in her teens, insisted that "a person unfolded completely only when happily married". Ashkhen took her friend's word for it.

"You can well understand, Volodya dear," she said to him one day, "that with my looks I couldn't expect anyone to be attracted to me. There is more distinction in my appearance now—the ugliness of a real witch has a peculiar appeal of its own—but when you're twenty and everyone shies at the sight of you, you look upon marriage as the sorry lot of the philistine.

But you must not follow my example. You must fall in love selflessly, passionately, and for all time. Now, why couldn't you fall in love with Katya? She's a serious, bright girl, and with your help she'd develop into quite a decent doctor in time."

Volodya stole a worried look at her face: why Katya all of a sudden? Why not the fat Kondoshina? Why not Nora with her long plaits and her penchant for the guitar? What did the two old women want of him?

"Let him be, Ashkhen," Zina said to her mildly. "He does love someone, but he won't tell us."

"He doesn't love anyone!" Ashkhen exclaimed. "He's a smug, conceited brat, that's what he is! I know his type, they are not capable of love. The yearnings of a young goat—that's all it is!"

"But I don't want to marry anyone," Volodya said piteously. "Honestly, you are a wilful commander, Ashkhen Ovanosovna. You're determined that I should marry, and that's that. And why the yearnings of a young goat, anyway?"

"All men are goats!" said Ashkhen. "And what I've just said stands!"

When at long last they dropped the subject of marriage, they had another idea: he had to write a thesis, present it, and get his degree. They returned to the subject every day. But he had neither the time for it nor the slightest wish to work on one of the themes which Ashkhen literally threw at his head.

"I believe you're very fond of Chekhov, aren't you?" he asked her, feeling really annoyed.

"I am, why?" she asked, sensing a catch somewhere.

"Good, then listen to this," said Volodya, and proceeded to read her a passage from the *Dull Story* where the young scholar, aspiring after a doctorate, comes to the professor for his theme. "I shall be very glad to help you, colleague," Volodya read, "but to begin with, let's come to an understanding of just what a thesis is. This word is commonly taken to mean a composition which is the product of independent creative endeavour. Isn't that so? Now, a composition written on someone else's theme under someone else's guidance, is called something else...."

Ashkhen reddened and said Volodya was being difficult.

Left alone with Zina, she told her in remorseful anxiety: "We've driven our boy to a moral crisis with our edifying talks. We were so busy suspecting him of careerism at first, that we failed to see that he had the heart of a Prince Myshkin. And

now it's up to us to straighten things out, because he doesn't know how to take life on its own terms. . . ."

All this was enough to drive him crazy.

Even the matter of his clothes was entirely in their hands. Having invented that thing about his being a Prince Myshkin, the two ladies went to no end of trouble to get him a completely new and rather posh outfit—they were so well liked everywhere that no one could refuse them anything—and now Volodya sported a naval officer's uniform of a beautiful cut and fit. He had a fashionable raincoat, a smart greatcoat, and a cap which Ashkhen had personally secured for him at the naval base warehouse. He found all this attention most embarrassing, of course, and when the old ladies gave him a cigarette case for his birthday—they had asked someone to buy it for them in Moscow and send it to them in good time—he was so overcome that he was even rude.

He hated both of them sometimes, and then Ashkhen's beak and Zina's chirping voice, the witch's pince-nez and the other's games of solitaire, all seemed to merge into one person and it was this person, who was so maddeningly solicitous, that Volodya could stand no more, while his two old ladies he went on loving respectfully, tenderly and gaily. He loved them even when they made him listen to something he knew as well as they did. . . .

"Sergei Petrovich Fyodorov, you didn't know him, Volodya dear," Ashkhen said with a meaningful inflection, "made some very clever and sharp recommendations: don't slaughter your contemporaries in your eagerness to ensure better medical treatment for people one or two centuries hence. . . ."

"Maybe it is both clever and sharp," Volodya said, "but for us surgeons there's a dangerous little twist in this. Actually. . . ."

"So you'd rather slaughter?" Ashkhen asked.

The field telephone buzzed. She picked up the receiver and said in a man's voice:

"Lilac listening. Yes, Comrade Colonel, that will be all right. All of them coming here? Good, we'll be ready to receive them."

She got up, mixed up Zina's solitaire cards, and gave Volodya's hair a tug.

"Let's go," she said. "We're getting a lot of wounded. We must go and make ready for them."

In a singsong voice she uttered her favourite line from the Iliad: "An artful physician is worth many warriors of splendour."

"Are you an artful physician, Volodya?"

"No. But I'm learning."

All that night, the following day, and the second endless night, the doctors and staff of the 126th field hospital worked without let-up. Again and again in those mad hours the nurse Kondoshina had to give Ashkhen a caffeine injection. The surgeons performed operations on all the available tables. Feldsher Mityashin fainted towards the end of the second night, and was carefully dragged outside into the cold. On coming to, he felt terribly put out and returned to the operating room, his face as yellow as a sterilised sponge. It was then that Volodya saw Vera Veresova, who had arrived with the doctors' reinforcement group. She walked into the room, holding out her hands, palms up, looking rosy from the cold, gaily efficient and excited. "How d'you do, Vladimir Afanasyevich," she called out to him.

He only darted a look at her with eyes that were as tired and red as a rabbit's. Never mind, he'd tell her what he thought of her later. But he never told her a thing. He was simply never given a chance, because Vera got in first.

"You act as if I'd landed you with a job in the rear," she said, gazing at him with shining, limpid and happy eyes. "You went into a sulk, you never wrote to me, and now you're wearing an injured air. But how have I wronged you? You're in a field hospital, this is a hot sector, you have marvellous commanding officers, and so how dare you not be grateful to me?"

"Really, Volodya dear, you ought to be grateful to Captain Veresova," said Ashkhen having clean forgotten everything. "Aren't you happy here?"

The surgeons from the reinforcement group sat in the low messroom, talking in loud voices, eating salad with onions and drinking tea. Palkin, who before Volodya's very eyes had filched three tins of sausage and who obviously dreaded an exposure, attended to the guests' needs with exaggerated geniality. Vera took Nora's guitar, and sang the sailors' song:

*I know I'd be dead, mates, without the sea,
As dead as the sea without me. . . .*

She sang well, so well, in fact, that Zina exclaimed: "You must go to the conservatoire, dear child! You sing with genuine feeling!"

"Feeling is not enough," Vera said, laughing. "Hundreds of thousands have feeling, but real singers are few. . . ."

Nurse Kondoshina rushed in to tell them that a snowstorm was coming, and the room felt cosier still because there was this gathering snowstorm outside. Then a sealed envelope was delivered, Ashkhen broke the seals solemnly and read out the order promoting her and Zina Bakunina to the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel of the Medical Corps, and Ustimenko to Major. And everyone could see how glad the two old ladies were for Volodya's sake. The occasion called for a drink, and so Palkin was despatched to Ashkhen's dugout to fetch a bottle of port.

"I've some spirits of wine in my flask," said Stupin, the head surgeon of the reinforcement group. "We could dilute it with water. . . ."

They rose to drink to the lieutenant-colonels and the major. Vera gazed at Volodya over the rim of her glass. And Ashkhen, too, was looking at him.

"I watched him on and off in the operating room this afternoon, when the wounded were streaming in," she said to Zina sotto voce. "Both today and yesterday. He's energetic, quick, careful and serious. What efficiency, Zina, my dear! At his age I was simply hopeless. And d'you know what I was thinking as I watched him?"

"No, what?" Zina asked in her usual timid manner.

"I was thinking that there's already a bit of our immortality in this efficiency of his. For instance, when he bends over the patient he does it exactly the way I do it, the way we were taught by Spasokukotsky. D'you see what I'm driving at?"

"And he palpates my way," said Zina, in an extreme of shyness now, but nevertheless looking straight at Ashkhen with her pale-blue, gentle little eyes. "I told him twice that he'd find it more convenient that way, and finally he agreed. . . ."

"Isn't he stubborn!" said Ashkhen, her admiring gaze on Volodya.

"He's very, very stubborn!" Zina echoed. "And see, he's busy already. He has already started an argument with Stupin. It's a polite argument, but still he's arguing. . . ."

And arguing he really was—the old ladies knew their Volodya.

"Now supposing I stay here with you?" Vera said, coming to sit beside Ashkhen. "Would you object? I'm a versatile sort of person, and I'll have perfect order everywhere, too."

Her eyes were on Volodya who was explaining to Stupin just where the foreign body was lodged in the humerus of Chief Petty Officer Monasenko, on whom he had operated that

evening, clarifying its exact position by tracing a drawing on the oilcloth with the handle of a fork. Colonel Stupin listened glumly, he wanted to say something, but was foiled by Volodya.

"So you don't think I have order, do you?" asked Ashkhen.

"No, why, you have a model field hospital, I meant that I'd also be of help to you running it."

Ashkhen did not say anything.

"May I speak to you frankly, as I would to my own dear mother?" Vera said softly. "May I, Ashkhen Ovanesovna?"

The old woman nodded her big head.

"I'm madly in love with that person," she whispered, indicating Volodya with a look. "I love him more than life itself, more than my parents, more than myself. For his sake I'd accept poverty, I'd be willing to follow him to the ends of the world...."

"That would not be necessary," said Ashkhen reflectively. "There would be no need for poverty either. This man will go far, Ustimenko will become an outstanding doctor. Even now he may be regarded as a phenomenon...."

"A phenomenon?" Vera repeated with her lips alone, and a bright flush suffused her cheeks.

"Yes, a phenomenon. And only very stupid people can fail to see it. And so, my dear Vera Nikolayevna, by bestowing your love on him you run no risk whatever..." and she trained her pince-nez on Vera with hard curiosity. "Our Medical Corps is well aware of Comrade Ustimenko's abilities, he has had several invitations to the base hospital, but I imagine you know about that. General Kharlamov takes a lively interest in his career. Also, Comrade Levin, who as you know is gravely ill, was completely captivated by Ustimenko, he told me...."

Vera's eyes were downcast, she did not say anything, she even felt a little awed.

And, as if reading her thoughts, Ashkhen continued: "In this war, my dear, nothing is simple: there are generals who have the post of captains—but maybe I'm exaggerating it a little.... But there certainly are captains who will enter Berlin as generals, or even marshals, and now I'm not exaggerating a bit. I believe in this supreme justice, my dear Vera Nikolayevna, even though a general holding a captain's post may think differently. Do you agree with me?"

Vera nodded quickly. She did not understand it quite. All she did understand was that Volodya would enter Berlin as a

general. She even closed her eyes for a moment, she was so glad for his sake.

"A person like Ustimenko needs a very good wife," she heard Ashkhen say. "He is earnest to a fault, d'you understand? He takes life seriously."

"And what's wrong with me?" Vera smiled slowly. "Am I stupid? Or ugly, perhaps? And, by the way, Ashkhen Ovanesovna, we belong to the same profession. . . ."

"Really?" Ashkhen asked after a pause. "Are you a doctor too?"

"What's the matter with her—is she crazy?" Vera thought in fright and anger. "You just wait, you old witch!"

At one in the afternoon, when the snowstorm had abated somewhat, the reinforcement group left for the harbour, and from there by launch for the main base. Volodya was busy dressing his patients' wounds, and so did not say good-bye to Vera. Ashkhen watched him for a while, listened in high delight to the scolding he gave nurse Sonechka, who was slow and careless, added a bit for good measure, and then started down the ice-covered granite steps to her private dugout. She had to tug hard at the heavy door to open it, and once inside she took off her padded jacket, took a cigarette out of the fancy box Stupin brought her that day, lit it, and said to Zina with a sigh:

"Our calf is going to be roped, Zina dear! Even she, the raving beauty, realises what a person like our Volodya may develop into with time. And I, the stupid old fool, couldn't restrain from adding more fuel to the fire. In your saintliness you probably do not know that there are women who madly love success, passionately and sincerely. Oh yes, there are women like that. They care only for success, and to achieve success they are prepared to make enormous sacrifices. . . ."

Zina swept her cards up and cried: "Why, Ashkhen, you really frighten me!"



Chapter 8

Straw And String

The conference opened on Friday in the Officers' Club at the naval base. The presidium table, draped in red cloth, stood in the garden of a Spanish grandee—in the shade of lustily blooming and festively ornate trees, with a marble fountain nearby. The manager of the theatre had insisted on putting up the scenery beforehand to avoid any delay in starting the show. And Colonel Mordvinov, who had the arrangements for the conference entrusted to him, had agreed, because he knew how keen everyone was to see the play which was the talk of the Navy.

In the chair was, Major-General Kharlamov, the Fleet Surgeon, a short, stocky man with the face of a rustic and steely

little eyes. He did not feel too comfortable in this Spanish grandee's garden which reeked of joiner's glue, especially after he had almost knocked down a plywood statue of Apollo when he was making his way to the platform, evoking a rumble of contained laughter from the packed hall. Nevertheless, the conference opened on a solemn note, and all those present felt uplifted: they were participating in a big cause and they experienced the pleasurable anticipation of hearing a lot of new, interesting and important things.

Opening the conference, Kharlamov gave a brief outline of the aims and tasks of the present short meeting, and, listening to him, it occurred to Volodya that it would do many of our habitual orators, who were great talkers on general subjects, a world of good to take a lesson from the doctors in modest laconism, and simple and clear thinking. Kharlamov was not repeating the thoughts of others that he had read somewhere, he was setting out his own ideas conceived as a result of long observations and based on conclusions drawn from those observations.

After Kharlamov the floor was given to Captain Shapiro, a young curly-haired man who looked very cross from embarrassment. He managed to say everything he had to say on primary suturing in the ten minutes he was given, demonstrated three wounded men and, in conclusion, quickly took off his coat and let everyone see the perfectly healed wound on his own body to prove his point. After a burst of laughter and applause, the curly-haired captain finally got into his coat after missing the sleeves again and again, and rushed away into the depths of the Spanish grandee's flowering garden. The small and stocky Kharlamov followed him with his small, stern eyes, and then said gravely:

"It is not amiss to mention here, I think, that Dr. Shapiro, having just begun to walk after his wound, stole into our operating room and there made good use of his enforced leisure by helping us and learning what he didn't finish learning in peacetime."

These words were greeted with a fresh burst of applause.

"He's a nice boy, this Senya Shapiro." Ashkhen said to Volodya. "One of those who even in old age look like students."

She was in a melting mood, a little sentimental even, she liked everything that day and trained her pince-nez approvingly on the gathering of doctors, their well-pressed uniforms, their

polished boots, and their shoulder loop insignia of bowls and snakes.

"It's clever of you to take notes," Ashkhen said to Volodya in the interval. "You'll gather an amazing amount of useful information here. It all comes from real everyday life. I don't like high-sounding words, but do believe me, I know from experience, Volodya dear, that conferences like this are the main motive force in our work in wartime. That's when you fully appreciate the meaning of our army of Soviet doctors, the strength of it, the power! You just wait, there'll be some heated debates yet, it's going to be very, very interesting. And isn't the place beautiful and festive with all those bright lights!"

Her eyes were shining feverishly, she coughed all the time, and Volodya watched her in some alarm. In the bar where open sandwiches, smeared with a queer sort of putty, and tea without sugar were sold against coupons issued for the purpose, Volodya ran into Colonel Mordvinov who was loudly and cheerfully telling some amusing story to two lady doctors. The ladies had their backs to Volodya and he did not know who they were, and only later, when he addressed Mordvinov, did he see that one of them was Vera Veresova. She was now standing in front of a large mirror, getting a lipstick out of her pistol holster. All lady doctors carried their lipstick and compacts in their holsters.

"Yes, Major, what can I do for you?" Mordvinov said unpleasantly, because if there was one thing he could not stand it was someone bothering him with business matters after hours.

"It's imperative to transfer Oganyan and Bakunina where conditions are more bearable," Volodya said. "They're both of them old, Bakunina's lumbago gives her no peace, and Oganyan has one bad cold after the next."

"Did they ask you to speak to me?"

"No, they didn't, but you must see. . . ."

"Oganyan and Bakunina are serving in the 126th field hospital of their own free will," Mordvinov said with harsh finality. "No one forced them and no one is holding them by force now. Let them each send in an application for transfer and we shall meet their wishes accordingly. Is that clear, Major?"

"No." Volodya said, his head bent forward with stubborn resolve. "They won't send in any applications. Like the great majority of our servicemen, they do not feel they can ask the command to give them better living conditions."

"Look here," said Mordvinov in mounting irritation as he looked about for Vera Veresova and the other lady doctor. "Look here, Major. Both Oganyan and Bakunina are perfectly satisfied with their jobs. They have no complaints to make to us. Both of them enjoy unquestionable authority, they have been decorated by the government and promoted. Articles about them appear in the press. And as for your 126th, we have hospitals much more crudely equipped than that."

"You must transfer Oganyan and Bakunina by order."

Mordvinov looked at Volodya superciliously with narrowed eyes.

"Any other instructions?"

"I'm not giving you instructions," said Volodya, looking into the colonel's arrogant and ironically imperious eyes. "I'm convinced. . . ."

"That will be all!" Mordvinov snapped, turning his back on Volodya.

"Oh no, it won't!" Livid with rage, Volodya took a step after Mordvinov, addressing the words to his broad and, probably very strong, back, "I'm going to write to the commander of the fleet. . . ."

"Write to God Almighty Himself," Mordvinov replied without turning round, and proceeded into the vestibule where Vera Veresova was smoking a cigarette. "Oh, here you are!" he called to her.

But she had seen Volodya and made a beeline for him, hurrying past Mordvinov with light, sliding steps.

"He won't look at me! Not even a glance!" She said, holding out both hands to him. "Smoldering eyes and all in a huff! What's wrong, Vladimir Afanasyevich? Were you nasty to him, Colonel?"

"It's the other way round, rather," Mordvinov made light of it in the deep rumbling tones of an old and able lady's man. He's going to write a complaint about me to the Commander, can you imagine, Vera Nikolayevna? Can you just imagine it?"

She smiled a little.

"And he will too," Volodya heard her steady voice.

She took his arm possessively and the three of them now walked abreast, with Vera in the middle.

"He most certainly will," she repeated. "And I'm sure he's right, although I've no idea what the feud is all about. This man is never wrong."

"So it's like that, is it?" Mordvinov smiled.

"Exactly. When I first spoke to you about Vladimir Afanasyevich you treated my request somewhat ironically, remember? And what did you tell me this morning, just before the conference opened? There! And, incidentally, it wasn't I who started it. . . ."

Mordvinov did not speak. His big, heavy face retained its expression of arrogant importance.

"You said: the main base needs a surgeon like him. You said that's what Kharlamov himself thought. Didn't you?"

Mordvinov got a little ahead of Vera, turned round and faced Volodya squarely.

"Is it clear to you now why I can't leave your field hospital understaffed?" he asked. "Or haven't you caught on yet? The order for your transfer will be signed tomorrow or the next day."

"Oh no, it won't," Volodya said coolly.

"Just what do you mean by that?"

"Only this: I'll write to the commander as I told you."

"But, Vladimir Afanasyevich," Vera said with gentle reproach, "perhaps. . . ."

He did not stop to listen. Angrily thrusting out his chin, he strode away from them—from Vera and the colonel both. The Commander would do something for the two old ladies, he was one of the best, the whole fleet loved him. He was asking for various kinds of trouble, of course, but he'd get to see him all the same, particularly since rumour had it that it wasn't so very difficult. He definitely would get to see him!

"Have you tried the sandwiches?" Ashkhen asked him when he came and sat down beside her. "I thought it was boot polish, but it's really whale meat."

"What did you say?"

"It's whale," Ashkhen said. "They say it's very good for you. It's so sweet of them to offer us refreshments. Good for Mordvinov, he knows how to do things in the grand manner. By the way, have you noticed that every single person here smells of Lilies of the Valley?"

"Yes, I have."

"That's Mordvinov too. You could get things at a kiosk early this morning, before the conference opened. Everyone who had an admission card was entitled to a small bottle of this scent,

two undercollars and some razor blades. But we came late. You and I are always late, Volodya dear, aren't we? And now everyone smells of lilies of the valley, and we don't. And I'll have nothing to bring back for poor Zina!"

"Don't worry, we'll get hold of something," Volodya promised glumly.

After the interval, when those presiding at the meeting resumed their seats under the flowering Spanish trees, there were sudden outbursts of clapping here and there. It was to welcome the medical officers of land forces stationed nearby. The garden of the Spanish grandee now had both naval M.O.'s in blue uniforms and Army surgeons in khaki tunics and heavy tall boots.

"I give the floor to our guest—Lieutenant-Colonel Bogoslovsky of the Medical Corps!" Kharlamov announced in a high-ringing voice.

Volodya cringed. They would meet later on. And he would himself experience the crushing impact of his teacher's unbearable grief. How was he able to live after losing his wife and daughter? How was he able to work? How was he able to endure this torture?

And instantly his thoughts turned to himself, to Rodion, to Varya. They lived and endured, didn't they. Aunt Aglaya was gone. It was certain now. She had vanished soon after that Moscow hospital interlude, and the plane which flew her to her "underground" had vanished too. No trace had been found of it. And she would never smile again—his unique aunt, the only one of her kind in the world, she'd never call him "Giraffe" again, and never again would that special glow light up her slightly slanting eyes making it so wonderful and easy to tell her his innermost, most vital and most secret thoughts. His aunt was no more and she never would be again, and yet they all lived, worked, slept, ate and even laughed. Could he ever have imagined his Aunt Aglaya dying?

"You aren't listening, Volodya dear," Ashkhen bent close to his ear to whisper. "He's saying something very interesting, your teacher is."

Volodya raised his head. Bogoslovsky appeared his usual self, except that in Chorny Yar he had looked more sunburnt than he did here in the Far North, and he had lost weight. He looked very neat, as usual, and his clean-shaven head gleamed in the strong overhead lights.

"Now, we don't!" Bogoslovsky said in a loud, firm voice turning to face the presidium table. "I repeat, we do not! You can send down any commission you like to check on this!"

A tall Army doctor with carefully parted hair and wearing a beautifully made service jacket was standing beside Kharlamov. There was a haughty smile on his long, pink, well-groomed face. He obviously wanted to say something, but Bogoslovsky gave him no chance. Kharlamov rang the small brass bell but, if anything, this only made Bogoslovsky speak the more hotly and loudly. The tall man with the side parting made a helpless gesture with his hands, as if to beg indulgence with Bogoslovsky, and sat down, while Kharlamov handed the bell and the list of speakers to Mordvinov and slowly walked away into the mysterious shadows of the Spanish grandee's garden, from where he would be able to hear every word perfectly but need no longer direct the proceedings.

"I haven't been listening. What is it all about?" Volodya whispered to Ashkhen.

Also whispering, she told him that in his quest for a substitute for gauze, of which he had none in his hospitals, Bogoslovsky had hit on straw, recalling his village childhood when he used to weave it into bags and wallets to sell to all those "young misses" and "young gentlemen", and in the same way his convalescent patients were now weaving it into strips. He sandwiched these strips with wet plaster of Paris, and the limbs thus immobilised could stand any amount of travel, all the way to Siberia, if necessary.

Bogoslovsky, limping badly, went up to the blackboard, which was propped up against the fountain, and with a piece of chalk made a quick, rough drawing of his straw splints.

"And where do you get your straw from?" someone asked from the front row.

"From the Vologda collective farmers. We're in the rear, you know," Bogoslovsky replied without turning away from the board. "When a doctor is called, we take a horse and cart and, after examining the patient, and ordering treatment, we ask for a bit of straw. . . ."

"They're short of straw themselves," said the Army doctor with the side parting. "It's rather tactless."

"Here are my splints," Bogoslovsky said, flinging the piece of chalk away with a raffish gesture. "The scale is in the top left

corner. There it is, for what it is worth. As for it being tactless," he said with deliberate slowness, half-turning to the presidium table, "and your various other remarks, the words you chose to use, Zinovy Romualdovich, are out of place when the matter concerns helping a wounded soldier. Russian peasant men and Russian peasant women never begrudge their soldier anything, and it has been so since time immemorial. He is fighting an honest battle, this soldier, he has been wounded defending his Motherland, so what has tactlessness got to do with it?"

A storm of applause broke out.

"I haven't finished," Bogoslovsky said sternly, even savagely, raising his large hand. "I have more to say about the shortage of gauze. Zinovy Romualdovich here, whose responsibility it is, by the way, to report on such matters to people higher up, has reproved me for making too big a fuss, about the absence of gauze. I don't know where the gauze intended for my wounded has gone; maybe those difficulties mentioned here really do exist. But then I'm not complaining. I'm offering a way out, an economical suggestion, I'm acting as a Communist and an old doctor. I've lived a long life and from it I've drawn an absolutely irrefutable conclusion: one must work not with an eye to one's superiors, but simply for the people. The soldiers and officers whose fractured limbs have been immobilised with our straw splints are at this very moment travelling in comfort and safety to hospitals far behind the lines—and this, my dear comrades, does us honour and is our reward. And there's one other thing I almost forgot to tell you of. It's about our string. In our hospitals, you see. . . ."

Silencing with an angry wave of his hand the fresh outburst of applause, Bogoslovsky went back to the blackboard and told the audience about the "string" they used for stopping sudden secondary hemorrhages, about the "magic stick" with which the string was "twisted this way and this way," and from the stick and string he jumped to fractures and the problem of preserving extremities. It was obvious to all that Bogoslovsky had a lot to tell them, that he wanted to share with them everything that he had discovered, devised and invented, that he was anxious to explain how best to apply his discoveries and inventions because he was firmly convinced that this was something needed by all. And indeed, all those straw splints, string and magic sticks were needed by all, and there was a rustle of pages being

turned over as the entire audience jotted down the country doctor's discoveries.

But it was not these discoveries alone that engaged Bogoslovsky's mind.

Now he made passes at certain regulations, wording his speech carefully and slyly, insulting no one, even making it quite flattering at times, and evoking a sympathetic chuckle from the surgeons present. In particular, he mentioned the regulation stipulating the imperative need to amputate the leg "if the resection of the femur exceeds seven centimetres".

"Now in Vologda, we sometimes violate this rule. It's too bad of us, of course, we apologise, we gladly plead guilty," he said angrily but not without humour. "We allow a resection of ten or twelve centimetres sometimes, and in two cases it was as much as nineteen, but through these mistakes, violations and faults of ours, we saved the wounded men's legs for them, and we'll go on saving them hereafter. . . ."

At that precise moment, there appeared from behind the queer Spanish trees, covered with blue and purple flowers, the Chief Surgeon himself, walking slowly forward and applauding Bogoslovsky. This lieutenant-general, an academician, was one of those doctors whose names live in the memory of mankind for generations.

The famous doctor came forward slowly, and the audience, watching his somewhat puffy face like that of a Roman patrician, saw how his eyes lighted up with amusement when he came to stop before the blackboard on which Bogoslovsky had illustrated his remarks. The Chief Surgeon, arms locked behind his back, studied the drawings long and carefully, then turned to face the meeting, frowning for a moment in reflection. Suddenly he smiled in a way that even his fiercest detractors qualified as charming and asked in his sonorous voice:

"Well, comrade surgeons, what do you think of this? We're not quite washed out, are we? Do we put life into dead instructions? We can give even the most authoritative signatories a bitter pill to swallow, can't we?"

Red spots stood out on Bogoslovsky's face, even his clean-shaven scalp turned a bright pink. The Chief Surgeon came and stood beside him and, touching his elbow affectionately, addressed the audience as informally as if it were an old friend.

"I heard every word, you know. About the straw, and the string, and the magic stick, and all the other discoveries and

inventions of our Nikolai Yevgenyevich. I came late, and had to stand behind those enormous cloth trees, for I didn't want to interrupt the speaker. But I couldn't help myself, you see, and I did interrupt, I was here on the stage before I knew it. I hope you will forgive me. And I feel I must tell you what I found so particularly gratifying: the generosity of people like our Nikolai Yevgenyevich here. What brought him here, what made him speak? The urge to give people what he had. And without a moment's procrastination! He tried to cram everything he had to say in the few minutes allotted each speaker, and he rattled his report off fast because he didn't want to waste your time. Right? And now I want to tell you something in confidence, I want to share my private views with you. If it were up to me I'd give Bogoslovsky a M.Sc. degree for this straw, this string and the rest of it. We've heard the statistics, haven't we, the figure is exceedingly modest—thousands of lives. So where's the snag, where's the reason for our Bogoslovsky remaining a plain doctor? Can anyone tell me this?"

The famous charming smile suddenly vanished from the patrician face, an angry light flickered in the big, dark eyes, and clenching his right hand he cleaved the air in front of him.

"We must break through!" It sounded like an order. "We must break through all these various highly esteemed, inaccessible holy of holies—those highest of high certifying commissions. We must put an end to it. We haven't got the time now, we're fighting a war, but we'll get down to it at six in the evening after the war, as our girls sing in that song. We'll ask our Soviet Government to settle this truly sore subject. That's all I had to say, Nikolai Yevgenyevich, our dear friend, colleague and teacher!"

"Oh, isn't he wonderful, isn't he precious!" Ashkhen gushed to Volodya. "Were you impressed? An academician calling a plain doctor teacher! Appreciate it?"

Everyone stood up to clap, and the applause was so long and so loud that Mordvinov's attempts to announce a break for lunch remained futile.

In the meantime the Chief Surgeon was saying to Kharlamov with a tender, mocking smile:

"I was wondering where you had gone. Surely you can't think the cat is the king of beasts? Why should you and I quake before this Romualdich, or whatever his name is? What's so terrifying about this onetime abortionist? His civility to superiors? His

ability to show his superiors only that which they want to see? Or, perhaps, his bombastic speeches? No, my dear friend, no. What good would our general's stars, our degrees and our authority be if we didn't make full use of them in our work and for the good of our work? We'll kick him out, because after all, my dear man, we are the powers that be, we're no dummy generals. . . ."

"I don't know how to do it. I'm a doctor, that's all," said Kharlamov, disliking himself, the whole course of events, and the Chief Surgeon's ironical tone.

"But I, too, am a doctor, my dear friend," the Chief Surgeon said, placing one hand on Kharlamov's shoulder and with the other taking a silver cigarette case out of his pocket. It was decorated with enamel and covered with gold monograms. "And that's precisely the point, it is us doctors that our Soviet state has vested with the power of generals in the medical service. Nor did it pick on the worst of the lot for the jobs, not the sort Pirogov meant when he said: 'There are no baser swines among us than generals from the medical service.' Remember? Well, since this army of doctors has been entrusted to us we must take command. Right? However, enough is enough on this subject. Are you going to take me to your place for dinner? Is your hospitality as warm as ever? With a little glass of vodka? Before the war, I remember, your good lady was a great expert at flavouring vodka with all sorts of herbs and things. I remember one kind particularly, it was flavoured with blackcurrant buds. . . ."

Laughing, and talking in this vein they walked past Surgeon Major Ustimenko who stood rigidly at attention. They were his new gods. It was the way he was made—he had to have someone he thought immeasurably better than himself to look up to. . . .

Ashken Falls III

In the lunch break Volodya hurried to headquarters where he wasted a lot of time begging the officer of the guard to let him in. The man naturally refused to do this. Finally when he persuaded him to put a telephone call through, he was told that no information would be given about Captain Stepanov.

"Why not?" Volodya shouted. "After all. . . ." But he was cut off.

The commandant would not tell him anything either.

The tenants of the house where Rodion used to live were not very affable. They were waiting for their husbands, who were away on submarines, to come back. Volodya could well imagine what it must be like to wait for a sailor on a submarine to come home, so he understood. They did not offer him a chair, and one of them, a tall, thin woman in a dark dress, shrugged and said:

"I don't really know anything, comrade. His wife died, I believe, and he gave up his room. He's moved house to his ship, most likely."

"Is it certain that his wife is dead?"

The tall woman shrugged again. She was probably wishing that he would hurry up and go. And so he went to the canteen, handed in his coupons, ate his soup which had wheat and codfish in it, and sat waiting for the second course which never came.

"Bring me another plate of soup then," he asked docilely.

When he was handing his coat to the cloakroom attendant at the Officer's Club, he saw Vera again. She had just come in and her cheeks were rosy from the cold.

"After this bore is over I'm expecting you at my place," she said, smiling and her eyes flashing. "We'll have a chat."

"I can't, I'm sorry," he said. "Firstly, because I must look after Ashkhen Ovanesovna, and secondly because I've got to speak to Bogoslovsky."

"You can bring Bogoslovsky along. I like him. And remember: your friends are my friends, and all your foes—my foes. Agreed? I'll find you towards the end."

Volodya nodded. On an impulse, he asked her to get him two bottles of "Lilies of the Valley".

"Two love affairs at the same time?" she asked, a smile in her eyes.

"Yes. With Ashkhen and Zina. . . ."

"You're a darling, you know," Vera said, lightly pressing her arm to Volodya's elbow. "I'd have never thought you were capable of caring so for those two old crones. . . ."

She promised to get him the scent without fail. . . .

After the lunch break there were fewer people, the higher officials were also absent. Ashkhen, who sat next to Volodya, was coughing badly and obviously running a fever.

To Volodya's great amazement, the first speaker was Vera. With her hair smoothly drawn back and parted in the centre she

made a very pretty picture of a modest young doctor. In a clear voice she read out, without a hitch, the results obtained from observations made of injured major joints. Mordvinov listened attentively, and twice, when there was talking in the audience, jingled the bell angrily. Volodya also listened attentively because he was curious to know what sort of a doctor Vera Veresova was.

"Oh well, it's sensible enough," Ashkhen said, yawning. "The Volga does really flow into the Caspian Sea, it's one of those indisputable discoveries. But on the whole, it's almost a ready thesis for a candidate's degree. And she even considers it her duty to make an acknowledgement to those who helped her to collect her material. Look at that! Mordvinov was one of them too!"

Volodya smiled: he loved it when Ashkhen was catty, it was always most amusing.

"Assistance was rendered only by the arrant Don Juans, it seems," she said gaping comically. "This is no scientific work, it's just goats feeling ruttish. Or rams. Or whoever they are. Incidentally, Volodya dear, I always noticed that it was much simpler for very pretty doctors to become scientists than for someone like me. That's probably because all you men are scoundrels."

"Thanks!" Volodya said gaily.

It was about seven when Kharlamov and the Chief Surgeon resumed their seats behind the presidium table. The hall was packed again, people were standing in the aisles and against the walls. When Kharlamov gave the floor to Lieutenant-Colonel Levin, the meeting clapped, Levin pushed his spectacles up with both hands to look at the audience in wonder, and accidentally swept all his notes on to the floor. People clapped again. Levin's absent-mindedness made one of the fleet's legends—a fact of which he was well aware.

"Oh, stop it!" he appealed to the conference. "You're grown-up people, you know!"

"Volodya, do you know that he's going to die soon?" Ashkhen whispered.

"I do," he answered. "Lukashevich told me, he and Timokhin examined him. They assisted Kharlamov. It's retroperitoneal carcinosis. They sewed him up. The version they invented for him is that they found it to be a stomach ulcer and had made a gastrointestinal anastomosis."

"He guessed the truth, did he?"

"Naturally."

"This is one of those cases when a knowledge of medicine is bad for a gravely ill doctor. As bad as an infection complicating his original disease."

"He knows and yet he refuses to give in!" said Volodya. "Just listen how well he talks. . . ."

Speaking in a very loud, croaking voice, and forgetting all about the notes he had prepared, Lieutenant-Colonel Levin was telling the audience about the repair of soft tissue by plastic surgery. By cutting the integument correctly and making the fullest use of the skin's ability to stretch, considerable integumentary defects could be covered. Wounds treated by this method healed much more quickly, and what was more important still, no painful, rigid cicatrix, so characteristic of the old method of treatment, was formed.

"Pshenichny, come here!" Levin suddenly shouted across the hall in a startlingly loud voice. "Where have you gone, come here quickly! I want to show our audience the remote likeness we get to successful results. . . ."

Pshenichny, a huge sailor, seeing no steps leading to the stage suddenly tensed himself and leapt across the orchestra pit. Everyone laughed and clapped, that leap alone giving the surgeons a pretty good idea of the "remote likeness to successful results" Levin had achieved.

Landing in front of the laughing generals and colonels, Pshenichny was momentarily put out, but a quick look at Levin reassured him and, using both hands, he deftly peeled off his blouse and duck jumper. The Chief Surgeon ran his powerful palms up and down the sailor's back, shook his head in wonder, and then turned the man round so that everyone in the hall might see Levin's work.

"Spotlight!" Mordvinov shouted to the lighting men in their box, and immediately a white beam slipped across the property trests and showed up the sailor's powerful and not very smooth back which looked as if it had just been sunburnt.

And Levin, standing in the comparative semi-darkness, outside the circle of light, showed with a pointer the patches of healed skin and described the course of the operation in an angry croak. Pshenichny stood perfectly still. He could easily have been taken not for a flesh-and-blood sailor but for one of the statues in the Spanish grandee's garden.

"Go into the audience now, Pshenichny," Levin told him. "And let them feel your back. No, leave your blouse here, no one will pinch it."

He gave the sailor a little shove, and from the way Pshenichny started down the aisle the surgeons could see how proud he was of his back.

"He patched it together from next to nothing, the Lieutenant-Colonel did," Pshenichny explained triumphantly. "From bits no bigger than this," with his thumb he measured off the tip of his little finger. "Can you beat it? When they brought me in it was a mess, a proper mess, that's all it was. But see, he sorted it out, and fixed it. . . ."

Both Volodya and Ashkhen also felt and squeezed the flesh on Pshenichny's back—no, they didn't discover a rigid cicatrix there. And Pshenichny walked up and down the aisles and between the rows of surgeons again and again, and it was obvious that he wanted them to take another look at his back, that he could go on forever demonstrating the achievements of medical science and telling about the size of the bits from which Levin had contrived to make him whole. Even when time was up he still kept looking about anxiously, hoping to find someone who had not yet seen his back. But everyone had seen it, and now Levin had a buttock case to demonstrate. The owner of the buttock, a petty officer, felt shy at first but then, remembering the injunction that it was just "science", he blushed a deep red and muttering: "All right, look if you must, I don't mind if you don't," started down the aisle, stomping heavily, and now and then letting out a thin squeal, explaining that he was ticklish and couldn't stand it when someone touched him with cold hands. He tried to slip past Ashkhen, but she said to him in her deep voice: "Come here this minute and stand still! I've seen plenty of backsides before, my lad!" And thoroughly examined all she considered necessary to examine. In the meantime, Levin, holding his spectacles in his hand, was answering questions.

When the conference was over, Ashkhen told Volodya that she felt all in, and would not stay to see the play. He made his way backstage, found Mordvinov and asked him to order a launch for Dr. Oganyan.

"I have no launch to spare just now," Mordvinov answered, and picking up his overcoat started quickly after the Chief Surgeon and Kharlamov.

"But she's ill," said Volodya, catching up with Mordvinov and once again addressing his retreating back. "She feels really bad."
"Let her stay in the hospital here. We'll make her comfortable."

"She won't stay. She has to get back to her field hospital. . . ."

"Look here, my launch is my launch!" Mordvinov barked in a maddened voice, swinging round. "A launch plies regularly between here and your Gorbataya Guba, and you know it. Any more questions?"

"We missed the last run, you know that." Volodya spoke sharply. "I'm asking you for the launch by way of an exception."

They stood facing one another in silence for some minutes.

"I can't, Ustimenko," Mordvinov said, his tone almost friendly. "I need the launch myself, please try to understand that."

"You can manage without it. You live here."

"It's none of your business where I live!" Mordvinov snapped furiously again. "And I won't have you telling me. . . ."

"No need to shout," Volodya said. "I'm not afraid of your shouting, you know."

There was nothing more to say. Mordvinov left, stamping noisily down the steps. Back in the hall, Volodya found Bogoslovsky and Vera with Ashkhen. Now that Bogoslovsky had nothing urgent to do, his eyes seemed empty, devoid of all expression. Still, he shook Volodya's hand heartily and slapped him lightly on the shoulder, simulating pleasure at seeing him again, and then said that he wanted a drink.

"I'll sit here a little longer," Ashkhen said. "Let everyone leave first, there's such a terrible crush in the vestibule. . . ."

She sat there a little longer with her eyes closed, then got to her feet and looked about her in bewilderment—a poor, old, ailing witch. However, she felt better outside. "It must have been the stuffiness, after all," she declared.

As the three of them accompanied Ashkhen to the pier, neither Volodya nor Bogoslovsky mentioned his wife and daughter or Aunt Aglaya by so much as a word, and Volodya thought: "I suppose he purposely avoids talking about them so he'll have the strength to live."

The streets were cold and dark, and the wind blew in vicious gusts from the bay. Ashkhen laboured along on Volodya's arm, slipping and almost falling again and again. She was in a bad temper, even the two bottles of "Lilies of the Valley" left her

indifferent, and she merely said to Vera with cool graciousness: "Thank you, my dear. It was very sweet of you."

The young Warrant Officer on duty at the pier informed them, speaking with that courtesy and smartness peculiar to naval officers, that they had missed the regular launch, and while there may be some "tubs" going their way, he had nothing definite to tell them at the moment. It was a pity, he said, that they had not come earlier because Comrade Mordvinov, Fleet Medical Officer, had just left in his launch for town with a Surgeon Captain.

"Was the Captain a woman?" Vera asked him.

"She was," he said, trying to keep a straight face. "A jolly sort, she laughed all the time. . . ."

"It's Lida Makaryeva he took home," Vera explained, but after a look at Volodya's grim face she said no more.

Ashkhen sank into a chair and wearily closed her eyes at once. "My poor, dear witch, what am I to do with you?" Volodya thought dejectedly. Outside there was a howling wind, it tore its way in through the chinks in the flimsy walls, rustled the papers on the desk and swung the lamp suspended from the ceiling. . . .

"Let's go to my place, please come, Ashkhen Ovanesovna," said Vera. "You'll ring me up if there's anything, won't you?" She turned to the Warrant Officer.

"Certainly!" he promised with alacrity.

But the old lady flatly refused to leave the pier.

"A launch or some other boat might tie up here for one minute literally, and I'd never make it. It's all right, you go, and I'll doze here awhile. Get along then," she snapped at Volodya. "I can't stand this 'care for the aged' business. Drink my health and I'll get well. Actually, I am well, it's just that I'm tired and not used to meetings."

The party at Vera's was not a happy affair. Bogoslovsky drank a tumbler of vodka and fell into a sombre reverie, taking no part in the conversation at all. Vera tried turning on the gramophone, playing the guitar and singing. She brought in food and carried it away untouched. Two naval officers dropped in. After speaking disparagingly of allopathy and praising homeopathy they just sat looking sleepy. Volodya asked them if they knew anything about Captain Rodion Stepanov. They knew him personally, it appeared, and were able to tell Volodya that Stepanov's daughter had been to see him a short while ago.

"Varya?" Volodya asked timidly.

"That's right. That's her name. She's here somewhere, in the Far North."

"Maybe you'll cheer up now!" Vera asked with a sharp look at Volodya. "Varya, I understand, is your sweetheart, isn't she?"

Without answering her, Volodya poured himself a glass of vodka and drank it. After that he had one with the officers, and one more with Bogoslovsky who was drinking steadily with the obvious desire to drink himself into a stupor. But oblivion just wouldn't come.

It was already late when Vera, coming to sit beside the rather tipsy Volodya, told him that she was set on getting transferred to his 126th field hospital.

"What's the attraction?" he asked.

"Guess."

"I'm no good at guessing. You'd better tell me what's new about our friend T'svetkov?"

Vera turned a delicate pink, and filling up hers and Volodya's glasses, touched his with her own and said: "Let's drink this to him. He's a big man now. He's going uphill faster than any other man I know."

"And he didn't take you up this hill with him?"

Vera looked at him tenderly and sadly.

"I wouldn't go with him now."

The two naval officers, suddenly feeling homesick, began to croon a nostalgic wartime song:

*In our dugout the store is alight,
On the pine logs the resins like tears. . . .
You're too far, I can't come to you, dear,
Death is nearer, it's waiting outside.*

"So you refuse to take me on?" Vera asked, laughing softly and giving Volodya an intimate, veiled look. "Do you?"

"But how can we take you on when we're full up, there's no vacancy. . . ."

"Oh, then I'll have to take matters into my own hands. I always get what I want, if I really want it. You don't know me at all. . . ."

"I do a little."

Soon after eleven the telephone rang. Vera answered it.

"Some lady friend of yours," she said handing the receiver to Volodya.

"Hullo," Volodya said. "Yes, Ustimenko here."

"This is Nora. It was my day off today, and on my way back I found Ashkhen Ovanesovna in the sentry's room," the nurse spoke in nervous haste. "She's in a bad way, I think maybe it's pneumonia. She is confused, too. . . ."

"Where are you now?"

"Why, right here, in the sentry's room at the pier. I keep telling her to go to the hospital, but it only makes her mad."

"I'm coming."

Bogoslovsky and Misha and Grisha, the two naval officers, went with Volodya. They said good-night to Vera who, stifling a yawn, promised her help if needed. While Volodya was getting into his overcoat, she whispered to him not to quarrel with Mordvinov and to try not to make any enemies there generally.

"You've made such a good name for yourself, you don't want to ruin your chances now," she added in parting.

The wind was still howling round the rocks and raising billows of stinging, prickly snow. It was so cold in the room that the Warrant Officer, though wearing a fur cap, black naval sheepskins and felt boots, was doing a tap dance to keep warm. Ashkhen, her face crimson from fever, was dozing in the corner. Nora—a slim young nurse in a black greatcoat—was holding a tin mug of water to her lips. There was someone else there, something bundled into a blanket and a woolen shawl, a child, most probably, but Volodya could not be sure.

"Wow, it's our old lady!" Misha cried in delight. "Recognise her, Grisha?"

It transpired that both of them were motor-torpedo-boat men, and once, after a raid, they had been taken to the 126th field hospital, slightly shell-shocked and frostbitten. They now remembered Volodya and Nora, as well.

Bogoslovsky put his fingers on Ashkhen's wrist and shook his head.

"She's got to be taken home," Nora was saying. "Otherwise she'll worry herself into an awful state. She keeps fretting that those wounded may be arriving and things will get in a mess. . . ."

Grisha and Misha glanced at each other, whispered together for a moment, and then called Volodya aside. From their point of view the only thing to do was to go and see the commander.

"At this time of night?" Volodya said in some doubt.

"He's always at headquarters at this hour," said Grisha.

"That's right," Misha confirmed. "The Admiral never leaves headquarters before 2 a.m."

"Will they let us in?"

Misha and Grisha exchanged glances again, and assured Volodya that if he went with them he would get in. Their flushed, energetic faces glowed with kindness and sympathy. They were determined to act and, if need be, take any risk involved.

"They won't stop us, Comrade Major, we know the password," Grisha told him.

"It just means breaking through," Misha declared resolutely. "In a case like this it's do or die."

In the whistling snowstorm, they took the ice-covered steps at a run, reaching headquarters in no more than ten minutes. Twice when Volodya slipped and tumbled down the steps the two naval officers rushed to the rescue, brushed the snow off him and told him to cheer up. They had no trouble getting inside the building. The aide, Gena, was a buddy of theirs and he made out a pass for them.

"The rest is up to you," he said hurriedly. "Hope you get through all right."

A stern-faced sailor with a submachine-gun stood guard in the red-carpeted hall. Grisha and Misha gave their service coats a tug, smoothed their hair with identical gestures, then gave Volodya's coat a tug for good measure and smoothed his hair too.

"Give it all you've got!" Grisha ordered.

"Here we go!" Misha said.

"Don't beat about the bush," Gena enjoined them. "He can't stand it."

Before they knew it they were standing in a large office, dark except for a shaded lamp on the desk.

Volodya saluted smartly. The Admiral switched on the chandelier, and Volodya took a look at the man who commanded the fleet in which he served. He was quite young, about forty, no more. His pepper-and-salt hair was brushed back from a tall forehead, and the eyes, gazing calmly from under very dark brows, showed how tired he was and how long he had gone short of sleep.

"I see," he said after a minute's silence. "And is this your escort?"

"If it hadn't been for them, I'd never have got in," Volodya said briskly.

"But with these young lions, it was easy, eh?" the Admiral said. "Obstacles do not exist for them, as our fleet newspaper says. Well, Major, what can I do for you?"

Volodya took a step forward and said his piece. He did not blame anyone or ask for anything. He simply told him about the two old ladies and what wonderful people they were. He demanded, in so many words, that they should be transferred to where conditions would be more suitable for them. He refused his own proposed appointment to the base hospital. Brusquely, as was his way, he informed the Admiral of Lieutenant-Colonel Oganyan's illness, and told him that it was imperative to take her back to her 126th field hospital at once, because she was so worried about it.

"So you need a launch?" the Admiral asked.

"Yes sir."

The Admiral pressed a button and gave a curt order into the telephone. Misha and Grisha began whispering excited admiration of the Commander into both Volodya's ears at once. Next, the Commander rang up someone else and demanded a full report on the matter by 11:00 tomorrow. The torpedo-boat men, warning to their subject, hissed into Volodya's ears that their commander was a really good scout.

"Are you the Dr. Ustimenko who removed the shell from that scout's shoulder?"

"It was the sapper who took out the fuse, Comrade Commander. All I did was to. . ."

"In short, you are the one. And were you the surgeon with the landing party on Cape Mezhuiev?"

"Our battalion was assigned to the landing party, or rather comrades from our battalion. . ."

"But you were there, weren't you?"

"Yes sir."

"Did you make parachute jumps into the water? Did the Air Force doctors enlist you for their experiments?"

"Yes, Major-General Kharlamov sent me to them several times. I made a few jumps, but I had bad luck, they picked me up too quickly. . ."

"Was it you who wrote that memo to the Air Force commander setting out your views on the overcooling of pilots in the water? What did he answer you?"

"Nothing, so far."

"So far," repeated the Admiral. "I see. Did you write to him about the burns suffered by seamen, too?"

"Yes, sir."

"No answer either?"

"No, sir."

"It's understandable enough," the Admiral said in even tones. "The men on high are busy people. Will you sum it all up—the overcooling and the burns—and give me a report in plain, layman's terms. Don't fidget, the launch is not due for another twenty minutes or so. Sit down. And your escort, Misha and Grisha, too," he said with a look of inimitably good-natured mockery. "The breakthrough group." And swinging round sharply to Volodya, he asked: "How can the command help your ladies just now? Dr. Oganyan, in particular?"

"With kindness," Volodya said. "The rest will take care of itself."

"Kindness, you say," the Admiral said slowly and pensively. "Oh well, that's easy enough."

Getting up, he looked Volodya up and down, and with an unexpected quick smile said: "It's funny your being a doctor."

"Why?"

"You'd be quite useful on a submarine, you're the type. Say, a commander of a raider operating independently. You've heard of them, I suppose. However I suppose your profession too, needs men of calibre."

He shook Volodya's hand warmly, and added with a smile: "Come straight to me if you need help. You don't have to bring an escort: Misha and Grisha will see to it, their friend Gena will fix everything. Oh, these 'buddies' are a menace!"

He saw his visitors to the door, but held Volodya back by placing a hand on his arm.

"No news from Aglaya Petrovna?" he asked in a low voice.

"No. And I'm afraid there won't be. Maybe Rodion Mefodyevich. . . ."

"He's at sea," the Admiral said. "He won't be back for awhile. Oh well, good-bye and good luck."

Misha and Grisha took Volodya back, helped him carry Ashkhen up the gangplank and settle her in a small, warm cabin, and then, standing beside Bogoslovsky on the pier, waved to Volodya as to an old friend.

Nora helped Ashkhen out of her overcoat and tucked her in. Then she proceeded to undo the umpteen scarves and shawls in which her daughter was bundled up.

"There you are, child," she said at long last. "It's nice and warm here. We're all right now, aren't we, we're nearly home."

Shake hands with Uncle, say how d'you do. He's our doctor, Vladimir Afanasyevich."

"How d'you do," the little girl said gravely, slowly raising her enormous eyelashes. "I'm Yelena."

"How d'you do, Yelena," Volodya answered as gravely. "Coming for a short stay with us?"

"No, not for a short stay," Nora said, plaiting the girl's hair with fast, nimble fingers. "I'm going to keep her with me for good. Our daddy's been killed by the fascists, and our granny has died. Yelena and I haven't anyone in the world now. We've no relatives left except for daddy's sister, but she can't stand us, she hates us, actually. Of course, her nerves are in a state, but..."

"She beat me," Yelena said gravely. "She pinched me and beat me. She hates us..."

The motors whined louder, and a wave broke against the side.

"We're in the open sea now, we'll be tossed about a bit, I expect," Volodya said.

"A hard bandage!" Ashkhen called out an order in her delirium. "Give him an intravenous injection of calcium chloride and a hypodermic injection of camphor. And look sharp!"

About the Girl Yelena

"You will take my place," Ashkhen told Volodya next morning. "You can take that as an order. Please consult me on difficult cases. That is, of course, if I'm in my right mind. And don't look at me in that commiserating way, the sulfidine is making me sick enough already."

"Ashkhen, please keep quiet!" Zina begged, clasping her hands to her breast.

Ashkhen said no more for a while, then suddenly told them to bring her a mirror.

She looked at her face for a minute or two, sighed lightly and said: "Do you know, I believe I've got better looking. Imagine the surprise if in her coffin Ashkhen Oganyan suddenly turns out to be a sleeping beauty. I used to take great comfort in thinking things like that when I was a little girl. It was from the fairy-tale, I believe... I'd be lying there so slim, so fair, so blue-eyed. However, one's pretty blue eyes are usually closed on those occasions..."

And she closed her eyes and fell into a doze again.

Karolina Yanovna, the huge, fat housekeeper, was waiting for Volodya outside. She had been quick enough to guess who Lieutenant-Colonel Oganyan's stand-in would be, and she was ready to take further orders from him. Somewhat surprised by this sudden eagerness to please, he told her he had no special orders. And then Karolina Yanovna, who had won notoriety in the 126th field hospital for her gushing politeness to superiors and her extraordinary rudeness to subordinates, asked Volodya in a most delicate manner what was to be done about the girl Yelena, whom Nora had *illegally* brought to the hospital and installed in the nurses' quarters.

"Are the nurses complaining?" Volodya asked.

"The nurses have a right to rest, Comrade Major."

"Does the child bother them?"

"Any child who is not sufficiently well-behaved. . . ."

"I'm asking you—have the nurses been complaining?"

"So far they have not made any complaints, but if they do object, Comrade Major. . . ."

"You'll send them to me. Anything else?"

"Yes. Where is the child's food to come from? I have not the right to short-ration the wounded who have shed their blood. . . ."

Volodya looked deliberately into the woman's compassionately-lying and craftily-sincere eyes: no, of course she had not the right, no one said she had. But what if, without going into the question, one simply put an extra ladleful of soup in Nora's mess tin? And gave her a bit more of the goulash? And a few slices of bread which was always left over anyway? After all, the child had had her share of suffering in this war, living among strangers, with her father killed in action and her mother volunteering for front-line service.

"Please don't take me wrong," said Karolina Yanovna. "I have children too, and I'm a good mother to them, but expecting me to be easygoing at the expense of the wounded and the sick entrusted to me. . . ."

"All right. We'll think it over," Volodya said. "And now call Nora, ask her to sign some form or receipt or something, and give her my supplementary ration."

"To Nora?" Karolina cried, her self-control snapping. "The whole ration?"

"Yes, to Nora. All of it except the cigarettes. Have I made myself clear?"

"Have you!" Karolina said, raising her plucked eyebrows tragically. "Your orders will be carried out, Comrade Major. But do I have the right to deprive you, our leading surgeon. . . ."

"That is not your worry!"

In the evening he happened upon Yelena in the passage leading to his underground surgery as it was called—the department of which he had charge and which included one huge ward, hewn out of the granite rock, a passage, two smaller wards, an operation theatre, a dressing room, and a boiler room.

"Good evening," Yelena said to him.

"Good evening," Volodya replied, hoping the child had not come to thank him for his ration. "What are you doing here?"

"Please let me sing, dance and recite poetry for the patients," the child spoke with grave dignity, raising her eyelashes that seemed too long to be real, and looking earnestly at Volodya. "I'm good at it. Especially dancing."

"But, Yelena, how old are you?"

"I'll be ten soon."

"Why are you so small then?"

"From undernourishment. Everyone's been asking me this on the train and on the ship, too. The food situation was very difficult with us."

A lump rose in Volodya's throat.

"Does your mother know you're here?"

"Mummy is on duty in the second ward. She told me to ask your permission to sing, dance and recite poetry."

"You have my permission. Only remember that some of the patients are in great pain, and if they don't like it, don't mind."

"I understand."

Neither spoke. Yelena stood in front of Volodya craning her neck a little and looking at him with her impossibly candid gaze.

"Come on," he said to her. "We'll fix you up with a white coat."

But that was easier said than done for there was nothing even remotely approaching her size to be found. Nurse Kondoshina, whom they met on her way to the storeroom, had a brain wave: why not put the child into a man's white pyjama top, belt it with a piece of bandage, and roll up the sleeves? Just then

Mityashin came looking for Volodya to tell him that a group of wounded had arrived from Cape Treskovsky.

"Nurse, let's go," Volodya said. "And you'll have to get cracking without us, Yelena."

The tall doctor and the kind nurse went away. Yelena remained there for a moment, thinking and sighing. Then she opened the door and found herself in an underground passage. Looking about her fearfully, and remembering what the doctor said about some of the patients being in great pain, the little girl padded softly down the long corridor. Everything here was unfamiliar, strange, and even creepy: the sharp smell of medicines, the queer, high stretchers on wheels, the brilliant light in the white dressing room, and the steady, lingering moans coming from the open door of a small ward.

Suddenly a man on crutches came out from another room and started towards Yelena.

"What apparition is this?" he asked in a deep, rumbling voice, bending low over the child.

Yelena flattened herself against the wall and did not utter a sound. The man smelt strongly of tobacco. He had such a thick growth on his cheeks and chin that he reminded her of the picture of Robinson Crusoe in the book she had just read, except that there were no parrots around him.

"What brings you here, apparition?" Robinson Crusoe asked. "And tell me, is there such a thing as child apparitions?"

"I don't know," Yelena replied with her innate earnestness. "But I'm not an apparition, I'm a girl, and I came here to sing, dance and recite poetry for the patients. I have the doctor's permission too."

"Well, I'll be darned!" cried the man in high delight.

Tap-tapping with his crutches, he led her into a huge room with a stone ceiling and stone walls. Only the floor was wooden. On some of the cots the grey blankets rose in a hump, and Robinson Crusoe explained to her rather obscurely that these humps were called ack-acks. Here and there in the dimly lit room she saw some strange, white and almost shapeless objects, and Robinson Crusoe told her they were legs and arms in plaster casts and that there was nothing extraordinary about this. One man was lying flat on his back, there was a kind of cage over his legs and inside this cage a small lamp bulb was burning. The sight horrified Yelena, and for a long time she could not tear her fascinated eyes away from the patient with the lamp.

"No need to shake in your shoes," Robinson Crusoe told her. "Pavlik's legs are burnt, and doctor is treating them by a new method, he's got all the latest scientific achievements lined up. The temperature in that box there has got to be kept even. And about those ack-acks. That's what we call them among ourselves, but actually they're cases of bone traction. To look at it it's a proper nightmare, with that nail there hammered right through the bone. But as a matter of fact our heroic Petty Officer Panassyuk feels no pain at all, do you Arkady?"

"What creature is that?" Arkady asked.

"I'll make the introductions in a minute," Robinson Crusoe replied. "Let her get a bit used to our zoo first."

"I am used to it already," Yelena said calmly.

"Oh well, if you are, let's begin." And in the bland tone of an experienced compere Robinson Crusoe announced: "Comrades, we have a visitor, a child called . . . I say, little girl, what is your name?"

"Yelena. Yelena Yartseva."

"A child called Yelena Yartseva. She tells me she can sing, dance and recite poetry. A budding actress, sort of. Shall we ask her to give us a song?"

"Sure," Petty Officer Panassyuk called out.

The attitude of the other patients to Yelena's debut was gracious enough.

"Let her."

"Come on, kid, don't be scared!"

"The first battle is the worst!"

"Give us all you've got!"

Feeling awkward and not sure how to begin, Yelena went up to Arkady Panassyuk's cot, clutched at the footboard, and looking into his kind, pale face said: "It's a song. It's called *Golden Evenings*."

"Fine, it's a nice song," Arkady said encouragingly.

Yelena cleared her throat quickly, and began to sing in a thin, pure and slightly vibrating voice:

*Golden evenings
Smell of honey,
Smell of mint. . . .*

She sang and stared with her still rather frightened eyes at the man who had the lamp bulb burning over his legs. He

watched her with a friendly, serious and pensive look, and when she had finished said loudly: "Bravo! Bravo! Bravo!"

"Stand from under, Fritzes, the sailors are here!" Arkady said approvingly and began to clap, striking his large palms together with a loud noise.

Yelena sang one more song. Several nurses and walking patients had gathered in the doorway by now. Robinson Crusoe, with a stern expression on his bristly face, called for silence, but he just said it for future reference because the room was perfectly still.

"And now I'll recite a poem for you. It's by Comrade Marshak", said Yelena, dropping her long, long eyelashes, which made her thin little face so touchingly sweet that Robinson Crusoe, who had two baby daughters of his own at home in Orel, broke into a sweat and caught his breath.

Yelena's fright on first entering the underground ward was gone. She did not feel any fear now. And the patients who had seemed so dangerous at first looked like ordinary people now, only they had to lie so uncomfortably. All of them applauded her, and those who could not clap because their arms and hands were injured, shouted: "Come on, Yelena, give us a poem!" "Don't be scared, kid!"

Still clutching the footboard of Arkady Panassyuk's cot, Yelena recited the poem about the old woman who took some milk to the market to sell.

It was a humorous piece, and with Yelena rendering it not the way people usually recite poetry but rather as a story she had made up herself, and telling it with a very serious air, made it funnier still. The wounded sailors roared, and Pavlik laughed until he cried.

"That's some old woman!" he gasped, wiping his tears away. "Of all the funny things. . ."

"And now I will dance for you," Yelena announced.

"Yelena Yartseva will now give us a dance! Comrades, attention!" Robinson Crusoe, who felt he was manager of the show, translated it for them, as it were, hopping on his crutches which he wielded very deftly.

The third part of the programme—the dances—was not as successful as the first two. The floor was so badly warped that when Yelena went into her intricate hopping and tapping, the beds jumped. One of the more restless patients began to moan, for which he was told off afterwards by his comrades. And so

Yelena had to stop halfway through her Kabardinian dance, confused and embarrassed. The men hastened to comfort her: dancing was a wonderful thing, of course, but it was best to do it in the corridor, the floor being what it was, and now perhaps she would give them another song and do the dance another time when Robinson Crusoe—a carpenter—had knocked the boards together so they would not wobble and wag like a dog's tail.

And Yelena sang.

Her stock of popular songs was large indeed, including *Katyusha* which was everyone's favourite, the humorous *No Way Out* ridiculing the crazy Führer, and also the wistful *To the War I Saw You Off*.

It was then that Volodya came in, or rather wedged himself into the crowd in the doorway. His patients made way for him, and he saw Yelena, flushed with success, singing the last chorus of her song. Feldsher Mityashin was breathing hotly down the back of Volodya's neck. Having clapped with everyone else, Volodya ordered him to put Yelena on ration as from tomorrow, and seeing Mityashin scratch the back of his head perplexedly and sigh, he added to clinch the matter: "On my responsibility. We'll work something out later."

"Put her down as what?" Mityashin sighed again. "If only I could have some grounds. To satisfy the bureaucrats."

"Put her down as a ward nurse."

"A ward nurse, Comrade Major?"

They were still working out how best to manage the allowance for Yelena when they emerged from the underground surgery into the pure, frosty air. A departing tug hooted once in Gorbataya Bay and a formation of bombers flew high in the sky in the direction of Kuvenap fjord.

Volodya said, choosing his words with care: "One must not lose sight of human beings when talking about the human race, Comrade Mityashin. The human race is made up of human beings. And Yelena is one of them."

"That's so, only I'm afraid there might be talk," said Mityashin.

"Talk about what?" In the darkness Volodya sounded annoyed.

"The usual kind. Nora's an attractive woman and a widow. You're a man, a handsome man, all our girls are crazy about you, and you're a bachelor to boot. . . ."

"I refuse to listen to such rot!" Volodya told him.

After a wash and a cup of tea he went to see Ashkhen. The poor dear witch was really ill. Zina was there, sterilising a syringe and sobbing quietly. Volodya looked at the temperature chart and took Ashkhen's pulse.

"What's new in your surgery?" Zina asked.

"Everything's all right."

"I wonder!" Ashkhen said without opening her eyes. "I'll find out everything once I'm up!"

And she began to talk in Armenian.

"She's cursing," Zina explained, smiling through her tears. "You may have noticed that she never complains. When it's natural for people to complain, Ashkhen curses instead. That's the kind she is."

Volodya was called at two in the morning.

"Two captains have arrived," nurse Kondoshina told him. "Newly appointed here. . . ."

"Let Karolina look after them, it's her worry. I'm dead tired."

"They insist on seeing you," the nurse said, shivering in the cold. "One of them's that good-looking woman, remember her, Veresova her name is, she was here once before. . . ."

"Tomorrow. First thing tomorrow morning. Have I made myself clear?"

Nurse Kondoshina sighed. "You have."

Where Is Your Aunt?

"And I still say it's nicer without your highly esteemed old ladies!" Vera said. "Don't mind my saying so, but the air is sweeter."

Volodya lit a cigarette in silence. She was only teasing, he knew, and so he tried not to lose his temper.

"Your precious Ashkhen is a tyrant, a dictator, a despot and slave driver." Vera had long had this sentence ready to spring at him. "However, you are a worthy pupil. Even Palkin complains that life has become more *ruthless* still since you've been in charge."

She glanced at him slyly from the corner of her eye. He walked at a leisurely pace, looking up at the pale-blue spring sky, and at the white caps that always rippled the surface of this cold, uninviting sea. How long has he been here? How many endless, tiring days, weeks, months, years, operations, dressings, staff meet-

ings, disasters, triumphs, conquests and losses? How many good-byes and how many homecomings to his granite halls as Ashkhen called them humorously, how many times she had scolded him, how many times had they quarrelled and not spoken for days except on business? But now that the old ladies were gone did he not catch himself speaking in Ashkhen's tone when dressing a wound or even when operating? Did he not notice the effects of her hard schooling on himself? And the fact that he was now a not too hopeless therapist—didn't he owe it to the meekest and mildest of creatures, to Zina, the wedding ring on whose white hand had washed down to a thin circlet?

"Was the trip tiring?" Vera asked.

"No."

"You got jolly sunburnt, though. You look like an old salt now. Like Misha and Grisha, they're just as brown from their northwesterners and northeasterners. It suits you, you know. All our girls will be crazy about you. Your beloved Yelena especially. . . ."

"Why Yelena?"

"Incidentally, some people think she's your child," Vera said with a slow smile. "They even find a certain likeness: the eye-lashes, for instance. Are they wrong?"

"It's sordid. Don't, please," he said..

They turned towards the rocks. The ascent began there. There were some birches—the puny, wretched birches of the Far North.

"Weren't you surprised that I came to meet you?" Vera asked.

"I was. Come to think of it, why did you?"

"I wasn't there because of you. I always go to meet this launch. The boredom in this God-fearing establishment of yours is enough to drive one to suicide."

"Try working harder, don't pass the buck to poor Shapiro all the time, and maybe you'll find it less boring."

"I distinctly hear the voice of Ashkhen. . . ."

"I'm very glad that I resemble her."

Suddenly Vera took his arm and held it tight.

"Stop it. I can't quarrel with you. It's torture. Understand?" She said ardently and quickly. "You're always teasing me, you never speak seriously to me, I can't stand that idiotic, ironical tone, all this bickering and mocking. I'm a human being, I'm a woman, made of flesh and blood and not stone. . . ."

"What do you mean precisely?" Volodya asked frigidly. "What am I supposed to be guilty of?"

She dropped his arm. He promptly took off his raincoat and folded it over his left arm so she could not touch him again. They walked on in silence. Perhaps the worst of it was that it was as a flesh and blood woman that he was aware of her. And she knew it. But she also knew that for some obscure reason he was resisting with all his strength what to her seemed an irresistible course of events.

"If this goes on much longer, I'll go mad," she thought in despair. "Perhaps I ought to go away. After all, it is becoming a stupid, idiotic farce. And I'm beginning to look ridiculous!"

And immediately she argued back: "Why ridiculous? All right, I love a man who doesn't love me, and others see it, so what? What's so funny about that? It's quite touching, really. It would be different if I were plain, if I had an ugly figure or, say, pockmarks on my face, but I am good-looking, as good-looking as he is, if not better. It's he who looks ridiculous—touch me not, I'm Adonis himself!"

She looked at him resentfully. He was strolling along, chewing on the filter tip of his cigarette, lost in thought. And now there was already the plump Mityashin, looking hot and flushed as if he had jumped straight out of a steambath, running towards them to report, pump Ustimenko's hand, and rejoice at his homecoming. . . .

"Well, see you later," Vera said sadly. "See you tonight."

"I s'pose so," Volodya replied absently, smiling at Mityashin who had come puffing up. "Yes, of course."

She left him and walked ahead with a light, graceful step. Glancing back, after awhile she saw Mityashin saying something excitedly to Volodya who nodded and beamed.

In the dugout where the two old ladies had lived and where he now lived alone, Volodya sat down on a stool, drank some tea and smoked a cigarette. Then he shaved, took a shower, changed into another service jacket, put on his white coat and cap and went to take a look at his surgery. It had long been a regular hospital, but from force of habit the fleet still called it the 126th or, from force of an even older habit, the old ladies' place.

The first person he saw in his surgery was young Yelena. A warmth filled his heart at once, and keeping out of sight he watched the child in a neatly fitting white coat (someone must have made one for her), with a well-trimmed bang above grey, wide-open eyes, carry a steaming bowl of soup to a cot, sit

down on the stool beside it, and spoon-feed the patient. Taking another step to the door, Volodya looked again and saw a medal pinned to the girl's coat. Literally unable to believe his eyes, he walked into the room, called to Yelena, smiled at the quick flash of joy in her eyes, and sat down on the cot of the man she was feeding.

"What on earth is that, Yelena?"

"It's a government award," she replied, glancing down at the medal and quickly raising her eyes again to look at Volodya. "While you were away, the Admiral came here and gave me this. It's a medal for 'Service in Battle'. Uncle Kolya, please eat," she said to the wounded man. "This is lovely soup. It's not made from bully beef, it's got fresh meat in it."

"She sure is strict," Uncle Kolya, a broad-shouldered man with bandaged hands, remarked. "A strict little nurse."

"I have to be with you," Yelena said meekly.

"Since when have you been doing this feeding job?" Volodya asked her.

"Ever since that first show. It's Comrade Mityashin who enlisted me. That time, you gave him an *impracticable* order, and he and Mummy thought and thought about it till late at night. And then Comrade Mityashin shouted at the top of his voice. . . ."

"He shouted?"

"'Eureka', he shouted. And then they enlisted me. See, I carry a small face towel, always fresh and clean, to put on the patient's chest, because some of them eat untidily. . . ."

"Oh, she's a clever little monkey," said Uncle Kolya, thrusting out his lips for Yelena to wipe. "D'you know her tactics, doctor? You'd be surprised. Say a patient refuses to eat. . . . The sight of food makes him sick or he lets his pain get the better of him, or he doesn't know what's good for him, well anyway—he refuses to eat. And do you know how she persuades him?"

"I tell him I'll lose my job," Yelena said with a sigh. "Dismissed for *inefficiency*. Wouldn't I be?"

She brushed the bread crumbs off Uncle Kolya's enormous chest, and went off to get the second course.

"She's just a chit, but she's more fun than a movie," Uncle Kolya said. "When she comes in and starts prattling away, it sort of takes the edge off your troubles. We call her our live newspaper. She's only quiet-like in front of you, but with us—you'd be surprised! She just fires away!"

Late that evening Ustimenko called the entire personnel of the erstwhile 126th, which had achieved hospital status through the efforts of Ashkhen Oganyan during her command, and gave them a stiff dressing down. According to Volodya the unit had gone to rack and ruin and they were slovenly, squalid and smug in their thinking—if they did any thinking at all. They were a bunch of big and small bosses, and the staff they bossed wanted, at all costs, to become bosses as well.

While Volodya was making his speech, Mityashin wrote him a note which said: "We're planning to hold a Party meeting tomorrow, your application for membership will be discussed." Volodya read it. Mityashin watched him to see his reaction. Volodya got the hint at once, and from the way his eyes suddenly flared up Mityashin realised that giving him that warning had been a fatal mistake: now, if ever, Ustimenko would throw all caution to the winds and get busy making enemies....

Nor was Mityashin wrong.

If there was one thing Volodya excelled in, it was making enemies. The very first person he struck out at was the meek and utterly unprepared Mityashin himself. Why had the generator that provided their electricity been allowed to get into such a condition that it could not be fixed to this day? Who was responsible for that, he'd like to know? And how could it be explained that Mityashin, who had sat about in the administration for several days and had even wangled an interview with the General himself, had never said a word about the breakdown? Was it because he was afraid of a reprimand? And how would he like to work in an operating room with the bulbs barely glowing? Didn't he think it made the surgeons jittery to operate with one eye on a light that might fail at any moment? Did Comrade Mityashin think it helped the war effort? Or had they all forgotten that the war was still on?

Mityashin blinked in puzzlement and asked for the floor. Ustimenko refused him. He next turned on Karolina Yanovna, the housekeeper, who had been in a dither since the meeting began because of the lidded pot, standing on Ustimenko's table, the contents of which were easy enough for her to guess.

"Oh damn, why didn't I see him slipping into the kitchen!" Karolina was thinking worriedly, paying scant attention to the scolding Mityashin was getting. "When did he go nosing in there, blast him? I was there most of the time, I only went away for an hour, no more, to get a little sleep, and the cook

didn't tell me anything! The double-crosser, I'll get even with him for this."

The cook was grinning slyly: he was in the right, he had his witnesses too, the nurses who were on kitchen duty. Sure, anyone might have a mishap like letting the barley soup get burnt, but he did tell Karolina, didn't he? Let her try and deny it now. And after tasting it, didn't she tell him to make some new soup for the doctors only and serve the burnt stuff to the patients after flavouring it with plenty of bay leaf? He'd tell all that. He didn't care if he got sent to the brig for it, but that bitch Karolina wouldn't get off lightly either. This Ustimenko man would make it hot for her, he'd mince no words. Even Ashkhen would seem an angel in comparison.

And, indeed, Volodya did make it hot and minced no words. The soup was tasted by all the doctors, and Mityashin was ordered to try it. Karolina took a sip, and the cook, looking affronted also had to have a few spoonfuls.

"Comrade Veresova, was it your duty to O.K. the dinner today?" Volodya suddenly turned to Vera.

"Yes, Comrade Major," she answered brightly and confidently. "The dinner was brought to me and I tasted it." She looked round at everyone with laughing eyes, and added: "It's done, you know, everywhere. . . ."

Many responded with a laugh, but there was no smile on Ustimenko's face. And Mityashin grew sadder still. He knew and understood their new boss better than the others did, and he had a good idea of how all this would end.

After the soup business, Ustimenko ordered Palkin, the disciple of Tolstoy, to give a full account of himself in a certain matter. Looking like Rasputin, who had already been killed by Purishkevich and Yusupov and had lain in the grave for a while, Palkin got to his feet and stood gasping for breath with an open mouth, feigning illness.

"He's putting on a heart turn," Mityashin said in disgust. "He's learnt the trick. What an actor!"

"We're waiting, Palkin," Ustimenko told him.

Speaking in nervous haste, Rasputin told them about stealing the tinned food. He made a detailed account of it, speaking with a confiding sort of smile, insinuating as it were that if all those gathered there were not his accomplices exactly, at any rate they were people who could not fail to understand him since they had human failings too. He ended every sentence

with quick rhetorical questions—"Don't you agree?" "It isn't such a terrible crime, is it, if a thing's been placed there in temptation's way?" "Surely I'm not to blame?" "It's temptation that's to blame and whoever put it my way, don't you think?" Everyone listened in silence. No one looked at Palkin-Rasputin. They all felt distressed, disgusted and ashamed. And because many had guessed that Palkin had been stealing supplies for a long time but had kept silent because of a stupid fastidiousness, because he did not tell the whole truth but rather felt his way along with his questions, and because many of them had at one time or another availed themselves of his services in small but not quite lawful matters—the doctors, nurses and the rest of the staff suffered tortures. All they wanted was to have the whole thing over as quickly as possible. But Ustimenko, who apparently suffered as keenly as the others, did not allow any side-stepping of the issues, and even Karolina Yanovna was compelled to stand up and explain a certain deal which Palkin had hinted at. Though he professed 'Tolstoy's nonresistance, he was fighting, in his underhand way. After that, nurse Kondoshina, a quiet person who blushed easily, got up to speak from her chair near the dining-room door.

"Comrade Major did right to lance this abscess," she said unexpectedly loudly. "I've known Comrade Ustimenko for a long time, I know this hurts him more than anyone. But it's my duty to speak and let everyone else do the same..."

She paused, mustering her courage, her kind face going quite white. Throwing her arms out in a clumsy gesture, she exclaimed:

"How did this come about? Does it mean that I, a Party member since 1924, also stole food from our wounded? I gave this crook a bottle of vodka for the stolen tins that he got for me to send home. Am I in this with him? But I didn't know! It never occurred to me!"

"Oh yes, it did, nurse Kondoshina," Volodya interrupted in a quiet voice. "No use pretending. It did occur to you, perhaps vaguely and hazily, but you would have wondered where Palkin got those large tins of bully beef from. After all, the thought couldn't have not occurred to you..."

Next to speak was Nora Yartseva. She felt sorry for Palkin, she said, and suggested that it would be best, perhaps, to settle the matter amicably with kindness, disgusting though the case was. Was there any sense in disgracing themselves before the

entire fleet, the Medical Service, and the High Command? Nora's voice shook, and everyone understood how ashamed she was for the hospital's good name, unsullied until then, how distressed that part of the blame for Palkin's old thieving ways would fall on the two old ladies, and how bitter the thought that the patients would be able to say: "The medical treatment there is not bad, but they cheat you out of your food. The thieving that goes on!"

Captain Shapiro seconded Nora's suggestion, and Vera Veresova, her eyes flashing as gaily as ever, joined in. She was all for kindness. Naturally, Palkin must be punished, but for heaven's sake let's not wash our dirty linen in public! There's no getting anything back now anyway!

Vera's speech was so sincere, so well-meaning and so guileless, that it got the first and fairly hearty applause that evening. When Volodya spoke, the response was reserved, even sullen. However, he knew it would be like that, and was prepared for it.

"There is kindness and kindness," he said, sweeping the gathering with an intent, stubborn look. "And we, medicos, are able to draw the distinction not less but more competently than people in other professions. "Surely, the grandmother wishes her baby grandson no ill when in her ignorance of what an acute abdomen means she gives him a hot-water bottle, and predetermines what may be a fatal outcome? And isn't it kindness that makes the young, inexperienced, unprofessional surgeon heed the pleas of a wounded man not to amputate his necrotic leg, only to have him die afterwards? I do not intend to argue about Palkin, his case is clear to me and I shall take action accordingly. I'm thinking of something else: where do we go from here? Are we going to be nice and kind? Shall we forgive the nice and kind Dr. Veresova for neglecting her duties and forgetting her professional honour—don't look at me so reproachfully, Dr. Shapiro, this goes for all of us in equal measure. Well then, shall we forgive her for eating the tasty soup meant specially for her and worrying little about the patients who had to throw theirs away because it was burnt and inedible? Is this what you're aiming at, comrades? Is this what you want? Or shall we give Comrade Mityashin a pat on the back for not speaking about the faulty generator? And just supposing the light in my operating room fails completely tonight, what then? Hold on until you fetch your paraffin lamps? And what state are the lamps in? I know, because I had a look at them. They're in the lousiest state possible! Science hasn't taught us yet how to operate in the dark.

But we must be nice and kind to Mityashin. And how must we be to the soldier, Ivanov or Petrov, who is brought in for an urgent operation?—what must we be? You, who are so nice and kind, you tell me! You teach me!”

People began to fidget and move in their chairs impatiently. Someone sitting against the wall heaved a ponderous sigh.

“If you go into the service don’t be slothful, if you must be slothful don’t go in the service, to paraphrase the words of Suvorov or someone,” Volodya said harshly. “Otherwise we’ll never get anywhere. There’s no helping Lieutenant-Colonel Oganyan hearing of our disgrace, regrettable though it is. I’d like to get a letter from her about it and read it out to you. When it comes to kindness, you know very well what her ideas are on this score. . . .”

Volodya had finished and lit a cigarette. He was all alone now, no one gave him so much as a look as they all filed out and knotted in small groups out of his way. And only Rasputin kept glancing at him sharply from where he stood near the door, probably waiting for everyone to go. But even then he did not approach Ustimenko—the expression on his face did not invite conversation.

No sooner had Volodya sat down at his desk to write the order than the telephone rang.

“Are you really going to give me a written reprimand?” Vera asked him.

“I certainly am.”

“Oh, a gentleman wouldn’t do it,” she said, laughing softly. “Here is a woman insanely in love with you, and instead of giving her orchids, or daisies at the worst, you give her a reprimand!”

He did not answer.

“I remember a title I once read somewhere—Ice and Fire. It’s about you,” she said in a low, urgent voice.

“It’s too high-sounding. . . .”

“Oh, but you like high-sounding words, don’t you? Look at what you said today ‘neglecting her duties and the honour of her profession!’ Why, even Tsvetkov would envy you your eloquence. Well, why don’t you say something?”

“I’m busy, I’m writing the order.”

“Meaning: leave me alone? Oh no, I won’t. I’m coming over with a bottle of wine. Well answer me, say something!”

“Good-night,” he said glumly, and put the receiver down.

The order was posted early next morning. Mityashin, Karolina Yanovna and the cook received reprimands, and Vera a strict reprimand.

"Why only me?" Vera demanded in irritation. "Aren't you overdoing it a bit?"

"You are a commissioned officer," he told her, looking straight into her eyes with a clear gaze. "And I cannot think one thing and do another. . . ."

At noon, Palkin was taken away, the prosecutor of the fleet having signed the warrant for his arrest.

The Party meeting had been called for 6 p.m. The Communists met on the rise above their hospital, at the foot of the rocky cliff. The evening was still, faintly misty and strangely warm. Tugs hooted beside the pier below, and motor boats and small launches were calling to one another in automobile-horn voices. A group of planes in wedge formation passed high overhead in the direction of Kuvenap fjord.

"War, war, war," said the red-haired, sharp-eyed patient sitting beside Volodya. "Meetings and partings, and various memories. Don't you remember me, Comrade Major?"

"I believe I have met you somewhere. . . ."

"I shall never forget you," the man said in a singsong voice, and putting on a serious mien took aim with the heel of his crutch and squashed a huge spider that had crawled out from behind a boulder. "No sirr-ee, I'll never forget you! You don't remember me at all?"

"Are you an airman?"

"No, why. We're terrestrial folk, we are. Want a cigarette?" Volodya took one.

Captain Shapiro, looking tousled and pale, appeared from behind the cliff, pulling off his white coat as he came. Behind him Mityashin was carrying a small table covered with a piece of red cloth, tacked down against the wind. And after him came nurse Kondoshima bringing the brief case which, Volodya knew, contained his personal record.

"I'm sorry we kept you waiting," Mityashin said, panting. "But Captain Shapiro had to put in some stitches urgently. Yere-meichik got himself into trouble. He decided to test his strength, the clumsy bear, in a wrestling bout. Well, he had his wrestling bout. Shall we begin? Is there a quorum? And shall we throw our cigarettes away, comrades, let us respect a Party meeting, shall we?"

Belkin, one of their male nurses, greeted this with a quiet laugh: Mityashin was always forgetting where smoking was allowed and where it was not.

The presidium was elected, after which Kondoshina asked the meeting's permission for so-and-so and so-and-so, whose names Volodya did not catch, to attend at their request. Nora Yartseva, appearing from behind Volodya's back on noiseless feet, whispered to him: "Don't you worry, Comrade Major, everything will be all right." She smiled at him and vanished. Karolina Yanovna gave Volodya a regal, gracious nod as though to cheer him up and tell him that she was not holding anything against him.

Mityashin set up his table very quickly and deftly and laid Volodya's personal file on the red cloth; nurse Kondoshina read out the agenda; and Captain Nesterovich from the Fleet Political Administration pulled the file up closer, with the eager look of a man who expects to discover something vitally important and new.

When Volodya had finished telling them his "autobiography" as nurse Kondoshina called it, more bombers appeared in the sky, flying over the hospital in the direction of the fjords, and he watched them out of sight. He had already flown a number of times now in one of those DB-3s on special medical assignments. He had friends in the Air Force and fancied they could see him from up there and would know what this day meant to him. Everyone else present at the meeting also glanced up into the pale-blue Arctic sky. At this hospital they had seen a lot of airmen come and go. There were probably some good friends of the nurses and doctors among those bomber crews now heading West. A sigh escaped the young nurse Lusya, at which Nora, the older and wiser, gave her a look of sharp reproof as much as to say that if it was that radio operator who never even troubled to write once, it was good riddance.

"Does anyone want to put any questions to Major Ustimenko?" asked nurse Kondoshina.

Volodya was standing perfectly still. The light sea breeze whipped his hair, his tired eyes were grave and calm, but he looked pale under the sun tan. He was worn out. All that day he had been operating at the motor-torpedo-boat base, and after that had been straightening things out at his hospital. . . .

"I would like to ask a question," said Captain Nesterovich, clearing his throat with a portentous grunt. "I have a question to ask Major Ustimenko. You have just stated that you do not

remember your mother and that you were brought up by your aunt, a certain Aglaya Petrovna Ustimenko, I believe the name is. You further stated that you owe everything to her and to your father, who died on a special mission. You also informed the Party meeting that until the summer of 1942 Aglaya Petrovna Ustimenko had maintained a regular correspondence with you, but that at present you receive no letters from her. I should like more clarity about this point. Where do you yourself think she is at present?"

"People do get killed in war." Volodya replied glumly.

"We know that," Nesterovich said unpleasantly. "But it's no answer, it's sheer demagoguery. Now what if your aunt gave herself up or is collaborating with the fascists?"

"I say, Comrade Captain," nurse Kondoshina said, starting up. "I really must ask you. . . ."

Nesterovich also got up from the boulder on which he had been sitting.

"The question was addressed to Major Ustimenko," he said, spacing out the words. "And Major Ustimenko must give me the answer."

"Good, I will give you the answer," Volodya said after a silence. "Here it is. I do not know what happened to my aunt. In all probability she has been killed. But personally I have never in my life met anyone cleaner, finer and more devoted to the Party than my aunt. And while I live no one will ever again dare to suspect her of what you've been saying here, and get away with it."

"Why shouldn't anyone dare?"

"Because I won't let them."

"How can you let or not let anyone?"

"The way you don't let people say dirty things about your mother!" the red-haired man who gave Volodya a cigarette before the meeting suddenly yelled in a husky, furious voice. "Never heard of it? Nor about your kid sister, nor about your old man, or is that news to you?"

"I imagine there's no need to say more," Captain Shapiro said. "Do you agree, comrades?"

"Especially since children are not answerable for their parents," Karolina Yanovna said abruptly to Nesterovich. "Nor are parents answerable for their children, for that matter."

"I am answerable," Volodya said calmly and firmly. "I am fully answerable for my aunt, as I expect she is for me, even

though she is my aunt and not my mother. But she is more than a mother to me, because being a good mother is conventional behaviour, whereas my aunt was young, and beautiful and unattached, and for her to encumber her youth with the care of a nephew, to give her very soul to a child in order to bring him up a real Soviet man, to take all the trouble to rear him, was no simple thing. He was a conceited young pup who thought he was a genius and wanted to be recognised as such, and he was an indifferent pupil too. And what sort of swine would I be if I would permit myself to be influenced by Captain Nesterovich's question and doubt my aunt's integrity if only for one fleeting second? Surely an application for Party membership coming from a... a doubting character like that could not be considered?"

He fell silent, lost in thought it seemed, and then, looking up, he met the clear, bright gaze of Nora Yartseva who sat right across from him, and gladly acknowledging this believing, undoubting look, he spoke again, loudly, distinctly, with strength and conviction.

"There must be no distrust! There is nothing more frightening than mutual suspiciousness. And no one will ever persuade me to suspect someone I trust. If I did I could not go on living. Can a man live without trust in his comrades even if he does curse them and quarrel with them sometimes? He can't. Can he fight a war? Even less so. You can do nothing without trust, isn't that so?"

"You're right," Mityashin said sharply. "Any more questions? Anyone want to speak? Sit down, Comrade Ustimenko, do take a seat on one of these boulders..."

Volodya sat down and wiped his sweating forehead with a handkerchief. Nesterovich was still rummaging through his personal records and Volodya felt strangely outraged. So much so, in fact, that he hardly heard Lieutenant-Captain Kozvurin reading aloud a letter from his mother in which some kind words were addressed to "our wonderful Soviet doctor who came to your rescue and nursed you, my darling boy, back to health better than your own mother would have done".

After Kozvurin, the floor was given to Mityashin, who was Volodya's sponsor, and then the letters addressed to the Party meeting by Zina and Ashkhen, his other sponsor, were read out. Nurse Kondoshina's reading was poor because she was finding Ashkhen's writing difficult to decipher, but the audience

listened with a smile. They could distinctly hear Lieutenant-Colonel Oganyan speaking in her imperious, abrupt, manner. When Kondoshina began to read Zina's letter, they remembered her meek voice, the delicate way she requested rather than ordered, and even seemed to see her gentle smile. At the closing sentence "my best regards and wishes to our wonderful, unforgettable, courageous staff" everyone clapped.

"See?" Mityashin said quickly to Volodya while the others were clapping. "The good old ladies believe in us, they think well of the staff! So we can't be very bad really. . . ."

"But wasn't I right yesterday?"

"I suppose you were," Mityashin agreed grudgingly. "Only you were too hard on us, Comrade Major."

The last to take the floor was Staff-Sergeant Dyakonov. And the minute he stood up to speak, leaning on his crutch a little showily, Volodya remembered him: the dare-devil gleam of his eyes, the triumphant smile, the strand of hair, falling over a sharply bent eyebrow, and the husky voice.

"Mine will be a short speech, my highly esteemed comrades," Dyakonov began, suddenly becoming agitated and jumping a little as he leaned on his crutch. "I don't want to hold your attention too long. Now my own autobiography is none too pretty, I'm ashamed to mention it, well, to put it in a nutshell I was a young larrikin with a record. Get it? I won't go into details, but I began this war in the penal battalion, where I wasn't put for nothing, as some prefer to give the lie about themselves. I was there for what I had done. An ugly business. Well, naturally being in there I learnt the price of peanuts, and washed some of the muck off myself with my own blood. Naturally, I tried to use a little less of my blood and as much as I could of the nazis'. Well, it was from there that our heroic and famous Captain Leontyev, who's celebrated throughout the Soviet Union, took me. And it was up to me to prove to him that he wasn't making a mistake in trusting someone like me. I did prove it, I proved it well, they even wrote about it in the papers. But when I'd proved it and was crawling back, back home, I got slugged. Well, I thought, Sasha, your number is up! You're finished, sonny boy. Burnt like a moth before you could report your final results. To cut a long story short, I managed to get to the local security and asked them to give me an escort, seeing that I'd been hit by a shell which hadn't exploded in my body but was right there, stuck into my shoulder. . . ."

"How awful!" Nora cried out.

"Exactly," Dyakonov agreed sternly. "It got stuck in my shoulder, and it was still there. Only the tail showed, and the fuze had been sucked into my insides and there was no telling what was going on there. . . ."

Volodya looked down. On the whole, Dyakonov was speaking the truth, but it was so overlaid with fiction that Volodya merely grunted and sighed as he listened to how "the Medical Officer Ustimenko who, with never a muscle twitching in his virile face, collected his iron will power and braced himself to the task of rendering this comrade harmless. . . ."

Everyone listened to Dyakonov with bated breath, the women gasping and exclaiming all the time, and Mityashin breathing noisily in his absorption—and strange thing, no one was shocked by his exaggerations, no one doubted the truth of his fantastic tale, and no one smiled at his slangy yet grandiloquent style.

"What's going on?" Volodya asked himself happily. "Only yesterday they heard all manner of bitter truths from me, and now they gladly believe a legend about me, an absurd tale. Does it mean that they want to believe in me? How much finer a person I'm obliged to become now, if even old Karolina is clapping so enthusiastically!"

People were clapping noisily, but Dyakonov put a stop to it with an imperious gesture, and turning to Volodya all but shouted:

"More honour and glory to you, Comrade Major, for speaking up like that about your aunt! See, Leontyev trusted me and what do you have before you now? A man decorated with three orders and already recommended for an even higher award, but let's not specify exactly what it is to be. I am grateful to your aunt for bringing you up to be the true Soviet intellectual you are, not a half-baked product or a lousy bureaucrat. These still occur—true, only rarely—hanging about and getting in our way. . . ."

And instantaneously turning into a graven image of himself, Dyakonov glared stonily into the watery blue eyes of the Captain from the Political Administration, and then, leaning hard on his crutch, about turned smartly and sat down amid stormy applause.

The vote for Volodya was unanimous.

After the meeting he went to take another look at his underground surgery. In the large ward, he stopped for a moment behind a wounded man who, between sighs of sweet longing,

was dictating to little Yelena who was tired enough after her day's work.

"I kiss your darling little feet and pretty hands, comma, and the whole of your wonderful sweet body, comma, Galya my own. . . ."

Yelena wrote slowly in large, childish letters, holding a book on her knees and on it the piece of note paper. Because the paper was not lined, the words had a tendency to slope downward; she tried to bring the next ones up to the right level again, and the impression one got was that she was not writing a letter but was drawing snakes—thick, horrible ones.

A few feet away people were slamming down their domino pieces, and a tender voice sang over the radio:

*Slipping from your drooping shoulders
Fluttered a pretty blue scarf. . . .*

"Uncle Vasya, is she your daughter?" Yelena asked, quickly raising her eyelashes.

"Who's my daughter?" Uncle Vasya was startled. But on second thoughts he agreed: "Sure, I'm writing to my daughter, who else? Galya, that's my little daughter. All right, let's go on: 'You're always there before me day and night, comma, my baby girl, comma, I'm crazy for you, I'm like a wild beast. . . .'"

"You'll frighten the child," Volodya said, coming round the bed. "Why frighten your daughter with wild beasts. . . ."

The patient, whom Yelena called Uncle Vasya, was abashed for a moment, and then looking straight into Volodya's eyes he said composedly: "My little daughter's a brave girl, Comrade Doctor, she doesn't scare easily."

"Go, Yelena child," Volodya said to her. "I'll finish it for you."

He sat down on her stool, quickly copied what she had written on to a clean piece of paper, and asked: "What now?"

"Now? Now write this: if you stop caring it'll be the end of me, because you are my love. And, Comrade Doctor, please write love with a capital L."

"With a capital L," Volodya repeated. "All right, we'll make it a capital L, just to please you."



Chapter 9

Under the Circumstances...

A thick-lipped officer of the day told Volodya that Fleet Surgeon Kharlamov was not at the main base—he was operating on some airmen in Levin's hospital, the officer believed, and was spending the night there. Unlike all the other medical officers Volodya knew, this one offered him no hospitality at all. He answered the questions put to him and that was as far as he was prepared to go. "But, after all, this is not a hotel," Volodya thought dully, excusing his colleague, and went down to the bay, to walk again under the cold midnight sun.

There was trouble in the sky: by now he had learnt to distinguish between the sounds of aircraft engines even when far away. He could tell our bombers from the Germans' nor did he confuse the fighters, no matter how fast or how high they flew. And now he heard very clearly the dull, thudding, gurgling sound of a fleet of enemy bombers coming on to bomb the town. In the same instant came the urgent rattle of fire from the anti-aircraft guns on the transport ships and on shore. Trouble was here again. . . .

"It's because of the convoy," Volodya decided, and again remembered the seamen in the hospital on the hill—Englishmen, Americans, Negroes, and that frostbitten Malayan dying on the operating table, and General Kharlamov saying in exasperation: "Damn and blast me if I know why there are so many frostbite cases! I give up trying to understand."

Fighter planes flew towards the harbour, and suddenly a German bomber, unbelievably enormous, swathed in black smoke and keeling over on its left wing, swooped down from behind the hills, roared over headquarters and the hospital, and bursting into flames crashed in the field just beyond Vdovino village. The fighter, which had brought it down, circled over the main base and then made for the harbour where all hell had broken loose.

Slowly, with heavy, weary feet, Volodya climbed up the steps hewn out in the side of the cliff, and pushed open the door of a low barrack which the local people called the hotel. The receptionist, a girl with spiteful little eyebrows who wore a short sailor's coat thrown over her shoulders, quickly turned round and before he could open his mouth told him they were full up and naturally there would be no vacancies that night.

"But maybe you could do something?" he asked, despising himself for his diffident, irresolute tone. "Actually, I could sleep on the floor even . . . I've absolutely nowhere else, you see, and at the same time it's imperative that I. . . ."

He was always refused if he asked the smallest thing for himself. Yet he was never refused if he asked for others. He supposed it all depended on the tone he used, on his manner, and this sad absence of self-assertion which he tried so hard to overcome and never could. "You lack dignity," Ashken used to chide him. "You act like a grown-up kid. How they promoted you to major, I don't see. Majors don't come like this, do they, Zina dear?" "No, of course not," she, too, had agreed.

But why in this particular case, for instance, couldn't he simply treat the matter impersonally: did he, a Major of the Medical Corps, have to sleep somewhere or didn't he? After all, he must be needed in the war if he was clothed, fed and paid a monthly salary. All right then, stick up for the major, for Major Ustimenko! Don't mumble. Stop twisting and pulling at that button on your coat. Stand up for Major Ustimenko the way you stand up for your subordinates and your wounded, the way you stood up for that little Yartseva girl—remember the row you kicked up about her, and with your commander, too.

"Listen, Comrade Medical Officer," said the girl with the spiteful eyebrows. "Standing there all night and nagging will not get you anywhere. Or didn't you get it the first time? We have no room!"

Ah, if he could put her in her place, say something to her in that steely voice which he used in the hospital and even with Karolina Yanovna when occasion demanded, if he could show her what a real commander was like!

However, he brooded on all this much later, after he had taken another stroll about the base and come to stop in front of a small squat building from inside of which issued sounds remindful of snorts and a rhythmical splashing.

Volodya recognised the building at once: it was the main base's new and already famous bathhouse. He had read an "ode" about it in the fleet newspaper a few days ago—a sort of hymn to it with lots of exclamation marks.

Oh well, very good!

Since he had nowhere to sleep, he might take a bath instead.

As Sergeant Shilov said when they were shipwrecked on Maly Treskovsky Island last year: "We'll sleep off what we don't eat."

He'd take a bath, get the chill out of his bones, and doze a bit. On a "summer" polar night like this, one wanted to get warm more than anything else.

Stand from under, Fritzes! He knew what to do now. He had a change of underwear and clean socks in his bag. And a cake of soap. He had nothing to scrub himself with, but some kind soul would surely let him use his sponge. That's how it would be.

Where did he get that expression from: Stand from under, Fritzes. Oh, of course, he saw it every day on the second page of the fleet newspaper, it was a headline. . . .

It was really too stupid of him not to have put that hotel girl with the silly eyebrows in her place. After all, he hadn't

been loafing around the last three days. He had been operating without a stop, with the nurses giving him caffeine injections all the time so he wouldn't fall asleep on his feet, and now they refused to let him into that barracks! Stand from under, Fritzes! He'd write about it to the newspaper, he'd write a sob story, a really harrowing story entitled most originally "The Cold Shoulder", he'd write something to astound the whole fleet!

However, the main thing was not to fall asleep in the bathhouse right away.

No, he wouldn't fall asleep.

He was naked, and the men about him were naked too. Nude was the word they used in novels. Or unclothed. On the wash-bench beside him sat an unclothed Georgian—a small, muscular and nimble chap, covered all over with a growth of strong dark hair like a monkey. He slapped his legs, beat his shoulders with the side of his hand, and massaged his shins and knees as expertly as a professional bath attendant. And chattered. Everyone there chattered—honestly, it wasn't a bath, it was a madhouse!

Now why couldn't they sit quietly and take a nice little snooze!

No, sleep was out.

Stand from under, Fritzes! He had to keep on the alert.

No doubt about it, there was a good chance of meeting someone he knew here and getting an invitation to sleep the night at the friend's place. That was why he had to keep on the alert. Supposing Lieutenant-Captain Loshadny were to come in? Volodya had extracted a pretty jagged chunk of shrapnel from his leg and given it to him as a keepsake—remember, Comrade Loshadny? Ah, to be invited to his cabin! Loshadny apart, there were lots of submarines, destroyers and mine sweepers in port. . . .

But he had to darn his socks before doing anything else. Being an old soldier he carried a needle and some thread in his bag. Something funny had happened to his eyes though, he simply could not thread the needle. His eyes insisted on closing. Finally, squinting short-sightedly and holding the needle in front of his nose, he took careful aim and got the thread through the eye. Quickly and not inefficiently he ran the needle through the ragged edges of the hole in the sock and gathered it into a hard knot, kneading it afterwards with his fingers to make it softer. Now he had to get down to his other sock. While meditating over the huge hole in the heel, he stuck the needle, eye down, into a crack in the bench, so it wouldn't get lost. And the very

next second, the hairy Georgian, cheerfully talking away, sat on it.

It really surpassed credulity that a man so virile and muscular should produce such a shrill squeal.

"Something's bitten me!" he shrieked, dancing about among the naked naval officers. "Something's bitten me!"

Everyone jumped up—those who were relaxing after their steaming, and those waiting in pleasurable anticipation for their turn to go in.

"He's got a thread dangling from there!" a Warrant Officer in underpants and a service coat hung with medals shouted in a hoarse seaman's voice. "He must have sat on a needle!"

"Allow me, I'm a doctor." Volodya curtly ordered the naked Georgian to stop his mad dashing about, and squatted behind him on his haunches.

The victim sobbed thinly.

"Don't kick!" Volodya said in a stern, professional voice. "It doesn't hurt as much as all that!"

"It's not the pain so much as the mortification," the victim snapped angrily.

The onlookers were already beginning to laugh.

"It isn't funny. It's a disgraceful thing to do—sticking needles all over the benches!" Volodya said, hardly believing that he could be so two-faced.

When the operation was over, the Georgian shook his hand warmly.

"You're welcome," Volodya said, still marvelling at his ability to lie. "But I repeat, it was a disgraceful thing to do."

He moved along the wall quickly. He thought he caught someone looking at him narrowly, and "danger lent him courage" as they say. He slipped into the steam room, just in case. He would certainly be safe there—amid the voluptuous groanings, the clouds of vapor, and the milky fog of this jolly, steaming inferno. And if he were run to earth, he'd talk his way out of it. If the victim were a civilian, all very well and fine. But supposing he was a colonel? Or, God forbid, an admiral of the strict kind? And supposing he gave the order: "Seize that raving lunatic with the needle and bring him to me at once!"

Then try and prove that you hadn't slept for three days!

He squirmed with hatred of himself.

And he was a liar, besides! A disgusting, brazen-faced, cool liar. The most two-faced of reptiles.

Or could this also be put down to overwork?

He sat drowsing over his wash basin in the common room for another half hour or so. At any rate it was warm there, and who could tell what the night held in store for him at this main base with its many big and warm houses into none of which he was invited. And then it wasn't as lonely sitting here as on the granite cliffs, and he didn't have to force himself to admire the austere, ineffable beauty of the North as some describe it.

But if you have a run of bad luck, you've bad luck all the way, as Ashkhen said to him on the eve of November 7th last year when he clumsily upset a big jar of iodine, spilling it all over himself. No sooner did he leave the baths than he ran into a patrol. It was past curfew and one had to have a night pass, which he naturally did not have. He did not even put up a resistance or argue—he let himself be led away by the two sailors with submachine-guns, walking meekly between them.

"Stand from under, Ustimenko!" he said to himself "Sailors here! Things couldn't be better, really. I've got a place to sleep now—on a bench at the station. It's sure to be warm there, and a fellow prisoner will offer me a smoke. Consider yourself lucky. . . ."

They had detained another man, and as they marched along Volodya suddenly, with a sinking heart, recognised the Georgian. He was a civilian, most fortunately. He wore a soft felt hat and carried a small shiny suitcase; in all probability he was obsessed by the same thoughts on bad luck as were also worrying Volodya.

"Why, my dear doctor!" the Georgian said. "You're my rescuer, aren't you? Do you know, I was about to ask your advice about something, but you had vanished. It's fantastic the bad luck I have with that particular part of my body. Didn't you notice anything when you were removing the needle? In October 1941, I fell asleep sitting on a hot plate in that house over there, at an old friend's. Something got switched on automatically, and I was taken to hospital with a second degree burn. In less than a year, on a very cold night, I fell asleep under similar circumstances but this time at the motor-torpedo-boat base sitting on the icy granite steps. And as a result, I had frostbite, not very badly it is true. And now this little accident. Perhaps you could give me some practical medical advice? Because you see, my dear doctor, this can't be allowed to go on. And, by the way, we haven't been introduced, you know."

The civilian introduced himself rather ceremoniously: his name was Elisbar Shabanovich Amirajibi, he was Captain of the *Alexander Pushkin*, and he presented his compliments. He had only that day arrived from the United States. But the day as such had been unsatisfactory, no point in going into details.

"Listen," he suddenly addressed one of the sailors, "Listen, dear friend, are you human or not quite?" He spoke in a throaty voice with just a shade of a soft guttural aspiration. "I have to see a friend of mine on board ship, it's very near, there's the ship, the *Svetly*, over there, surely you can understand it? Try to understand. We'll start unloading tomorrow, and that will be the end of me, listen you, with the submachine-gun!"

The sailor coughed raucously and made no reply.

"Have you or have you not?" Amirajibi asked insinuatingly. "Have you a soul? A heart? Do you carry within you a vessel overflowing with the milk of human kindness? A never dimming light?"

"You must know the word," the sailor told him in a low, gentle rumble that seemed to rise from deep within him. He spoke as to a child: "It's wartime, anyone might be prowling about, spies are dropped from planes too. . . ."

"The word is sights!" Amirajibi pronounced sweetly with a cooing catch in his voice.

"No. Not sights."

"The word is aircraft!"

"Not aircraft either."

"Not sights and not aircraft," Amirajibi confirmed musingly with sincere regret. "Maybe, in that case, it's engine?"

"No."

Amirajibi took a deep breath and rattled off: "Tank-helm-propeller-hen-rooster-duck-turkey-grouse-seagull-torpedo-flagpole-sailor-minesweeper-destroyer-battleship-aircraft carrier."

No answer. The other sailor chuckled.

"What a man!" Amirajibi said mournfully. "Amazing. Adamant. Like a Stone Age man."

"Never mind your insults," the sailor said, suddenly feeling very offended. "We've seen all kinds here. One bird reached for my chin and got himself locked up for five days—he only got out today, just before supper. Left turn, down the basement steps, second door on the right!"

In the room behind the second door on the right sat a young, kind-looking officer.

Amirajibi and Volodya put their papers down on the table in front of him. The master of the *Alexander Pushkin* offered the officer a Chesterfield and a stick of chewing gum. The officer helped himself to a couple of cigarettes and two sticks of gum. The sailor, who had blue spots on his once frostbitten cheeks, was sitting on a bench, looking aggrieved and gloomy. Amirajibi offered him a cigarette as well, which, of course, he ought not to have done.

"Don't want it," the sailor said in his deep-chested, infinitely kind and extremely hurt voice. "First you insult me and then you push your cigarettes at me? I sent in four reports, asking to go into combat, and here I get nothing but insults from all sorts of characters who've never even been near any fighting."

"Who insulted you, Petrenko?" the officer asked.

"This civilian here, he insulted me, he says I'm like a Stone Age man. How am I supposed to take that?"

"I see," the officer said in a metallic, commandant's voice. And his face—so kind, boyish and jolly—became inscrutable, a typical commandant's face: expressionless and ageless, a mask of firmness. "I see," he repeated. "Kindly sit down over there on that bench. Smoking is not allowed. Or talking. We'll have your identity checked in the morning."

"But the documents!" Volodya exclaimed.

"Documents are made by people," the officer said enigmatically "Understand?"

And since there was nothing further to be said, he spat his chewing gum out and threw his half-smoked cigarette into the stove. Volodya thought it a pity about the cigarette, and immediately fell asleep.

He woke up at six sharp. Amirajibi was fast asleep leaning back against the wall, his beak-nosed face raised. His profile stood out sharply, and Volodya was surprised to see that he was not a young man by far.

"No, none here," the officer was saying into the telephone in a sleepily buoyant voice. "No, I have no Heroes of the Soviet Union among the detained. . . ."

"Who says you haven't?" Amirajibi asked, clearing his throat and opening one eye a little. "Any one of us, my dear friends, may become a Hero tomorrow or the day after."

Crossing the room with firm, resilient strides, he snatched the receiver from the officer's hand and quickly spoke into it:

"Yes sir, this is Captain Amirajibi, Comrade Admiral. No, no one detained us, we simply lost our way, a very nice Major of the Medical Corps and I, and we almost froze in this beautiful spring weather. The officer on duty, a most considerate comrade, let us in out of the cold. We've been sitting here and resting. No, Comrade Admiral, on the contrary, we appreciated it, we are extremely grateful to him. He offered us truly naval hospitality. Was it my Chief Officer Petrokovsky who put you to this trouble because of me? Thank you, Comrade Admiral, yes, we'll be on our way to the *Svetly* in a minute."

The officer on duty reached convulsively for the receiver, but Amirajibi had already put it down. Everyone remained silent for a few seconds. The sailor, who had taken exception to being likened to Stone Age man, was glumly finishing the cigarette he had rolled for himself.

"You should have told us you are a Hero," the officer on duty began, trying not to look into Amirajibi's eyes, but the latter cut him short.

"No, I shouldn't have," he said distinctly, quietly and sadly. "Nor should there be any ill feeling. Forgive me, Comrade Petrenko, if I offended you, but I never meant to, believe me. 'Well, let's shake hands and say good-bye, the road is calling, I must fly' to use the words of an old and touching ballad."

The sailor threw his cigarette into the stove, and stepped forward.

"Give me your hand, my dear Petrenko," Amirajibi said. "We're quite decent people, all of us, only we're feeling the strain a bit. Not too much, of course, because after all it's only the third year of war and for real men it's nothing, really. But sometimes our sense of humour plays us false. Me especially. I never know when to stop, and then the joke is on me. Well, good-bye, dear Comrade Commandant, be always as vigilant as you are now, it's useful in times of war. Coming, Comrade Major?"

"Where?"

"With me, to see my good old friend. . . ."

They came out into the impenetrable, thick white mist that had settled over the entire main base. Everything was hushed—the battleships, the small motorboats, the steamers, the huge Liberty ships, loaded with explosives, tinned meat and boots; a hush lay over the ring of airfields, the harbour, the town, the nearest and the farthest bases.

"Comrade Hero of the Soviet Union," they heard the sailor's deep, gentle voice behind them. "I have orders to escort you to the *Svetly*."

"Do, by all means, my dear fellow," Amirajibi answered as gently. "Do escort us, my young friend. To come back to the way you have addressed me, it's not quite correct. For instance, take the thing which happened to me yesterday before the very eyes of our good doctor here. I was, so to speak, the victim of an accident. I received a slight and absolutely unexpected injury under really peaceful conditions. The doctor gave me first aid. He performed a small operation on my person right there and then. He's very resourceful, this Surgeon Major. Well, do you imagine that I did not scream when I received the injury? No, my dear fellow, I did scream and moan, I even kicked, which was aptly remarked upon by our friend the Surgeon Major. And so, Comrade Petrenko, from this you may conclude that no man remains a hero always. We must be heroes, and every one of us must and can be a hero when circumstances so dictate. Do you understand?"

"Yes sir," the sailor's answer came to Volodya through the cold, clammy mist.

"You must remember this, my dear friend," Amirajibi continued. "And if you had been in those same circumstances as I, you too would have received the Gold Star. I have no doubt about it. Don't you agree?"

They were identified at the foot of the *Svetly*'s gangplank and then taken up to a bright, warm saloon. The steam heating made small crackling noises—a homely sound. The orderly in a white coat asked the visitors if they would like some tea, which was brought so quickly that it might have been ready and waiting for them. Amirajibi asked him to bring them three glasses, holding up three fingers, then he unlocked his shiny suitcase, got out a bottle of brandy and put it on the table. Volodya was reading the colourful label on the bottle when he heard an unnervingly familiar voice ask: "Who's this getting drunk at such an ungodly hour?"

The heavy bottle slipped out of Volodya's fingers and plopped softly on the plush-covered sofa. Before he could turn round, he felt Rodion Mefodyevich's powerful hand grip his shoulder, and impulsively, as in his childhood, he pressed his face to the older man's cheek—freshly shaven, weather-beaten, and stiff from the cold. Rodion Mefodyevich stroked Volodya's hair, and this, too,

was like those days long, long ago, in that other peacetime life in Krasivaya Street, when Aunt Aglaya was there safe and sound and Varya was with them still.

"A Medical Officer, now look at that," Rodion was saying tenderly. "Major of the Medical Corps. Decorated, too. An old soldier. So we're both fighting. . . ."

"Yes, you see. . . ."

"I do see. Come across Varya lately?"

"No, where is she?"

"She's here, quite near, she comes over to see me sometimes. And your aunt—I'll forestall your question—I don't know anything, not a thing. And nobody does."

A shadow seemed to fall over his face, he jerked one shoulder violently, shook his head, and then turned to Amirajibi and hugged him.

"I haven't even congratulated you yet," he said in a quiet voice that was firm with gladness for his friend. "I didn't know where to send the cable. To what ports or which countries. So you've made the leap from enemy of the people to Hero of the Soviet Union? Without changing trains? How did it happen anyway, tell me. . . ."

"Nothing really happened, Rodion. We serve the Soviet Union, that's all there is to it. If you want to know about our battle episodes and how we repelled the attacks the fascist vultures made on our ship which had valuable cargo to deliver to its destination, it has all been beautifully described in the fleet newspaper. You do read it, don't you? There you'll see all of us painted as fearless, strong-willed, disciplined and resourceful sea eagles. . . ."

Both were smiling about something, but just what it was Volodya did not understand. Unhurriedly and very elegantly (he did everything with a peculiar elegance and grace) Amirajibi filled their glasses, and raising his glass said quietly and emphatically.

"I should like our young doctor, my new friend and benefactor, to know that Rodion Mefodyevich Stepanov, a friend of my early youth, undaunted by the danger to himself and his career, got me out of prison where I was doing time for nothing less than treason. . . ."

"We serve the Soviet Union!" Stepanov said with his gentle half-smile.

"It is precisely what I want to drink to," said Amirajibi, placing his hand on Stepanov's arm. "This toast is very popular on my ship, the *Alexander Pushkin*."

They brought their glasses together, which, touching, tinkled sweetly, and then Captain Amirajibi said in a very low, urgent voice:

"The service! Death to the German invaders!"

**Sir Lionel Richard Charles Gay,
5th Earl of Neville**

"Captain Amirajibi rang, Comrade Major," the soldier on duty told Volodya, reading the name in syllables from the piece of paper he had written it on. "He'll call again at 13:00. He asked you to please wait."

The soldier grinned: evidently Amirajibi had said something funny to him on the phone.

"Will you be here until then?"

Volodya nodded.

He finished his cod and gruel and was now waiting for his promised tea, but they seemed to have been forgotten—both Volodya and the tea. Truth to tell, he was not too hopeful about getting the tea, and he merely thought it polite to wait a little longer. His rank was not high enough to rule out forgetfulness of his needs, but he could not simply get up and leave when he had been told: "And now we'll bring you a nice cup of tea, Doctor, you do look fagged out. . . ."

He sat there waiting, smoking and re-reading Yevgeny's letter.

"No news about Aglaya, of course. What was the big idea trying to do a man's job anyway, when I know for a fact that they wanted her to stay in Moscow! I'm naturally very sorry for her, she's not a bad sort and she was quite a good wife to father, from what I know. But can you imagine what all this may develop into? At any rate it's no bed of roses for the old man, if only insofar as it will affect his service record, we're all of us grown-up people and we know what's what. He'll have plenty of trouble yet!

Have you seen him, by the way?

Do find him and buck the old chap up, I have a feeling that he's in the dumps: you know how it is, being in love at his age, the last love, and all that.

News of my mother's death caused me a great emotional trauma. However, let's not talk about it, it hurts too much.

You never see Varya, do you? She's given up her acting for good and is fighting, like all the rest of us, somewhere in your parts. She's no sissy, that kid—she takes after the old man in this.

Iraida and Yurka are in Alma-Ata. They nag and squeeze me dry in parcels. His Excellency the father-in-law got somehow left out of things, 'he hasn't found his place' as he put it in a letter to me, and what with this and that he, too, has become another mouth for poor me to feed. You can imagine how I feel.

I'm working on my candidate's thesis. One funny bloke suggested a cute little theme to me, I believe he regretted it afterwards, but you know my grip, it's a grip of steel, what's mine is mine, especially in matters of science. And, incidentally, I let him have it straight.

I'm not running a charity institution, I told him.

Two old women—Oganyan and Bakunina—stayed the night here when passing through town. I heard a lot about Your Highness from them. The No. 1 old woman—Oganyan—spoke about you with a kind of worshipful exaltation, you are to become another Kupriyanov, Burdenko or Bakulev, it seems. I added my bit of fuel to the fire by saying that we were students together and that you were top-notch in everything—the brightest of the bright. The two old crones exchanged ecstatic glances, and now I'm their best friend, I even got a letter from them. I'm terribly glad for you, old chap. The old ladies are the gushing sort, but are full of energy, and what with their connections and the universal respect they enjoy, they can be made quite useful in a crisis if one is clever about it.

Write, will you.

If you ever get stumped in matters organisational, you may always count on me, I'm not the sort to hold a grudge, I'll help all I can.

You didn't, by any chance, get married, I hope?

Don't take this rash step, you'll curse yourself ever afterwards.

Just love love, you know, love to make love, our way of life offers absolutely limitless opportunities in this respect. We graze among the fragrant flowers, so to speak, so who if not us should enjoy their fragrance—this is how it was put by Colonel Tsvetkov of the Medical Corps who came to inspect us the other day.

I believe you know him. As a matter of fact, he did not deign to speak to me, I'm too small fry for him. . . .

Well, good luck, old chap. keep your feet warm, and see you in Berlin."

"Hello, is this my rescuer?" Amirajibi asked at 1 p.m. sharp.

"Hello! Welcome home all safe and sound!"

"How do you know it was safe and sound?"

Volodya had nothing to say for a moment.

"Anyhow you're here again!" he said.

"Anyhow describes it perfectly! There's something I want you to do, my dear friend. Have you been to the hospital where the Americans and Britishers are, I mean in the last two or three days?"

"At Ward's, you mean? No, I haven't."

"You're needed there. I heard say today that you're the oracle here when it comes to overcooling and frostbite. Well, at Ward's, or whatever his name is, there's one very nice youngster, an Englishman, a pilot. He fought in the sky above us, and finally we hauled him on board out of the water. He's a funny boy with the heart of a young lion, a lion-hearted beginner. He's got to be mended, doctor."

"But I've no orders to this effect," Volodya said. "Ward hates me to call at his place, you see. It's not as simple as it appears."

"All right, you'll get your orders," Captain Amirajibi said firmly. "You'll have your orders soon, doctor, and in the meantime try to find a moment to visit us on the *Alexander Pushkin*, but don't put it off too long. Try and make it while we've still got some coffee, brandy and cigarettes."

The order came through at once. General Kharlamov rang up and told Ustimenko that Dr. Ward, as stiff-necked as ever, had already managed to make quite a mess of things, and it was up to Ustimenko to straighten it out without delay.

"On whose orders shall I say I'm acting when I get there?"

"On the request of Commodore Woodsworth addressed to me."

"I see."

"And mind your p's and q's," came Kharlamov's surprising request. "Use a bit of diplomacy. You know how it is with them—all those *persona grata* and *persona non grata*, all those distinctions are so hellishly subtle, so please be as careful as you can."

"I see," Volodya said again. "I'll be there this evening."

Beside the hospital on the hill was Jack, the fat and ruddy-faced English chef, walking on a leash the tomcat he doted on.

The tomcat, slinking like a real beast of prey, pretended to be prowling among the rubble, and Jack followed him, saying "Puss-puss-puss" all the time.

When he saw Ustimenko, he tried as always to lure him into his kitchen and give him a good meal, but Volodya declined the invitation and Jack felt somewhat hurt, as usual.

"I know, too much tinned food is no good, but I've got a bit of pudding. It also comes out of a tin, but it's good."

"I can't possibly, Jack, I'm in a hurry."

The chef's small eyes regarded Volodya attentively and sadly.

All the members of Jack's large family had been killed by a bomb in Coventry, and ever since they told him he had been lavishing care on someone or other in this Russian Arctic town. Children were his special concern, and he went to no end of trouble for them. About a year earlier, the old chef had made friends with a boy called Petya whom he stuffed with chocolate and other good things practically by force, but then Petya was evacuated, and he left Jack his tomcat, an amazingly clever cat, Jack said, but he refused to understand English.

"He still won't understand?" Volodya asked with a nod at the cat.

"He's clever, but he's stubborn," Jack said.

"Do you hear from Petya?"

"I had one letter. He's a bright laddie, but very lazy."

Ward came to the front door to meet the Russian doctor.

He was a small man, very well-mannered, very much the gentleman, very correct, and he had one of those snouty faces surmounted with glittering spectacles. This Glasgow doctor had his own opinion—culled from books and memorised—for everything in the world, and also his everlasting, unalterable, iron-bound rules, endorsed by the most authoritative names. Of course, he had never yet had to deal with men suffering from immersion in the waters of the Barents Sea, who were wounded besides, and sometimes had burns as well, but then he had his handbooks, bulky ones and slim ones, with the help of which he had formed a new set of rules for himself covering every contingency, rules once again based on authoritative opinion. He also had his pots of ointments and oils, a great variety of pots with excellent ground-in glass stoppers and screwed-on lids, all bearing labels, on which there was a small red cross and underneath the printed directions on how to apply the wonderful contents produced by a famous pharmaceutical firm.

Ward believed in these pots, but above all else he believed in streptocide and streptocide suppositories. One had to hear the tone in which he said: "A streptocide suppository must be introduced into the wound canal, we have plenty of them of every conceivable shape and size, you know. It's definitely prescribed."

And so he introduced his streptocide suppositories, embalmed the wounds with his ointments, and sprinkled them with powders—efficiently and diligently, never troubled by doubt for a moment because he acted strictly in accordance with the law laid down by those whose authority could not be questioned. And since he did have his instructions to use streptocide suppositories, he could hardly disobey them, could he?

Actually he was not a bad sort, and he certainly was most conscientious, but he must have been taught in a way differing from ours, a way which Volodya's former theatre sister, now working for Ward, called "outlandish".

All that evening, the whole of that spring night, and part of the following day Volodya examined and treated Ward's patients. He issued the orders in his blood-chilling English. At first he had to repeat them two or three times before the meaning became clear to the Englishmen, but finally they got used to each other.

At dawn, a boy was laid on his operating table: his condition was so grave that Volodya felt at a loss. The boy had been hit by a large-calibre machine-gun bullet a little below his right shoulder blade. He also suffered from burns and overcooling in the sea.

"What the devil have you..." Volodya began, but stopped short, remembering that he had to use a bit of "diplomacy". With a forceps, Ward pointed out to him where he had placed his patent pads. "Blood group!" Volodya ordered, pretending to be listening to his colleague's polite explanations.

The boy on the table clenched his teeth so hard that his cheek muscles stood out in hard knots under his tender white skin. Volodya knew what excruciating pain this narrow-hipped, fair-haired, tortured boy must be suffering. In spite of the assurances of the pharmaceutical firm, the removal of the pads was not a painless process. They had to be ripped away. And for all Volodya's expert handling, gained in numerous burns and frost-bite cases before this, large drops of sweat appeared on the English boy's white forehead.

"Lieutenant Neville's fortitude is astounding," said Dr. Ward. "And his self-control. By the way, we've just heard that Lieutenant Neville has been awarded the Victoria Cross for that last engagement over the convoy. . . ."

"So he's the one—the lion-hearted beginner," Volodya remembered Amirajibi's words over the telephone.

"Sir Lionel is a bit nervous, naturally," Dr. Ward went on.

"Oh, do shut up!" Lionel suddenly snapped at him. "I want to throw up when I hear your grating voice."

But Sir Lionel never moaned once, although tears stood in his eyes. They were angry tears of pain and shame because others could see his sufferings.

"Look here, Dr. Ward," Volodya said when they were having coffee in the English doctor's small office. "It's not the first time I've begun to say this to you: you're doing irreparable damage to your immersion cases through your fear of warmth. It's a lot of stupid nonsense that it will harm those patients. Keep them warm, a warm bath. . . ."

"But not one of the recognised authorities. . . ." Ward was off as usual.

"All right," Volodya said with a wave. "Your recognised authorities will collapse after killing off all the immersion and frostbite cases in this war. But it will be too late then."

Out in the passage he found his old friend, the bearded *Ottilia* boatswain, lying in wait for him. There was an air of secrecy about the man.

"You here again?" Volodya asked.

"I'm all twisted with rheumatism," the boatswain said. "And besides I wanted to see you and. . . ."

He produced a book he had been holding behind his back and held it out to Volodya.

"It's a present," he said. "It's a little present for you, doc, for bothering with me when I was about ready to kick the bucket. It's a book. And you can't refuse to accept it."

Volodya looked at the book: it was a handsome volume of Shakespeare's plays which included *Hamlet*, *Othello* and *King Lear*.

"Why, thank you," he said. "I appreciate it very much."

"Hold on a minute," the boatswain shouted gladly. "There's more to it than that. I talked it over with some smart guys. Shakespeare was a good writer. The best ever. You ought to translate the plays into Russian and let the Russian theatres put

them on. They'll be crazy about them, and you'll make a pile. There's the money—right there!" He jabbed at the book with his forefinger.

"Thank you again," Volodya said. "Much as I hate to disappoint you, old man, I've got to tell you that Shakespeare's been translated long ago and our theatres have long been putting on his plays. For a long, long time. So I won't be able to make any money on it. But I will enjoy reading Shakespeare in English, and remembering the *Ottilia* boatswain."

Volodya left him standing there, speechless with astonishment, and, waving to him from the far end of the passage, went into Lionel's room.

"The pain was pretty awful, I know," Volodya said, sitting down on a stool between the Englishman and the perpetually drunk American mechanic from the *St. Michael*. "You should have screamed a couple of times, it helps."

"He's not that kind," the mechanic butted in with a lazy smile on his beefy face. "He's too proud, doc. He believes in nothing in this world, and despises everything. Even when the Admiral himself yesterday. . . ."

"Shut your fat mug," Lionel told him, and strangely the mechanic did not take the slightest offence.

As Volodya picked up Lionel's slim hand to take his pulse, he noticed the ring he wore—a black stone with a skull carved on it.

"Doctor, are you a Communist?" he asked suddenly.

"Why do you ask?"

"I'm making a collection. . . ."

He watched Volodya with impudent curiosity.

"A collection of what?"

"Impressions."

"I'm afraid I don't quite get you," Volodya muttered with growing irritation which he tried to hold in check. "I'm the doctor, and you're the patient. That's all."

"No, it's not," Lionel said, biting his lower lip because he was still in great pain. "It's far from all. I was fished out of the water by Russian Communists. One of them nearly drowned, actually. The ship which picked me up was also a Communist ship, called after your leader *Alexander Pushkin*."

Volodya smiled, but Lionel did not notice.

"And now I'm being treated by a Communist doctor. That's the collection I'm making. Communists. But I know Mosley

too—have you heard of him, or aren't you even allowed to mention them?"

"I believe Mosley is in prison just now?"

"I've seen Mussolini too," Lionel said with a challenge. "I saw him quite close. We were also presented to Göring. I was the youngest pilot in Europe then."

"Nice friends you have," Volodya said, getting up to go. "It's quite embarrassing to sit here and chat with a celebrity like you."

"Stay a little longer," Lionel said, ignoring Volodya's sarcasm. "Have a drop of whisky with me. . . ."

They were alone in the room now. The fat mechanic and the three sailors had gone off to play cards. There was a tiresome drizzle outside the open window which had plywood nailed over the panes, and from the outer harbour came the hooting of foghorns on transport ships, the chugging of tugs. . . .

"What will you have—whisky or brandy?"

"Neither," Volodya said. "Pour a little brandy into your milk, it won't do you any harm. . . ."

"And you're not allowed because you're a Communist?"

"I'm not allowed because I have more operations to perform today. Just as you're not allowed when you have a plane to pilot."

"I'm never going to fly again, am I, doc?"

The question was so sudden that Volodya was taken aback.

"Why don't you say something?"

"Stuff and nonsense! You'll be flying for the next hundred years!"

"That ass Ward says so too," Lionel said with a wistful smile. "But I know better. And I gathered that, what with his pads and things, he missed the main thing. I know what made you so furious there, in the operating room. . . ."

"Ward is a competent doctor," Volodya lied, avoiding the boy's eyes. "Our views differ on minor points, but on the whole. . . ."

"Ward is a nitwit," Lionel said stubbornly and vehemently. "He simply didn't know I was there until he found out who I was. And I didn't tell him on purpose, because it's too unbearably sickening. Oh, but when the Commodore arrived and the cable came from Mother. . . ."

He made a grimace of extreme loathing, tossed his head once, and fell silent.

"But who are you? A prince? Or a duke incognito?" Volodya asked him. "I've read something of the sort, rather dull stuff."

"Do you know what the peerage of Great Britain means? Ever heard of it?"

"Well, yes," Volodya said, not very sure of his ground. "It's two hundred families or something like that, isn't it?"

"I am what you call a 'class enemy'. I am your enemy."

And he looked at Volodya with a cocky challenge in his eyes.

"You—my enemy?"

"Yes. I'm a peer!"

Volodya remembered now: lords, peers, earls, Knights of the Bath, Knights of the Garter, and all the rest of them.

"Well, I'm a Lord!"

"Byron was a Lord too and it didn't matter!" Volodya said not very brightly. "Lord Byron, I mean."

"Byron?" Lionel said, surprised. "Oh yes."

"We have a very good writer, Alexei Tolstoy. He was a Count, incidentally. And then there's Ignatyev, the General, he too was a Count."

They glared at each other. And then Volodya began to see the funny side of it.

"All that is rot!" Lionel said defiantly. "You'll stop smiling when I tell you who I am. My name is Lionel Richard Charles Gay, 5th Earl of Neville."

"My word! Good for you! I only saw the like in a play before the war: a waiter walks in and announces 'His Highness so and so'...."

"Why a waiter?" Lionel made a fastidious grimace.

"Well, a valet."

"And not a valet either."

"Who is he then? A Grand Duke?" Volodya teased. He had called the man a waiter in fun, too.

But Lionel had seen through his game.

"Stop it," he said angrily. "At any rate I'm no comrade to you."

Volodya sighed. He was getting bored.

"I'm not interested in all those valets and grand dukes," he said. "To me you're simply a wounded pilot, and to you I'm simply a doctor. And let's not try each other's patience with any silly nonsense, shall we, Sir Fifth Earl of Neville?"

"Aha, you're afraid to discuss things freely!" Lionel exclaimed with a funny note of triumph in his voice. "You're even afraid of

arguing with me. I know, people told me that you're all sort of ironbound here. . . ."

"Look here, Sir Lionel," Volodya said, getting up again and this time determined to go. "When you're well again we'll have a good long chat on whatever topics interest you. But just now you must go to sleep, and I have work to do. . . ."

"But will you come to see me again?"

"I should say so. I'm your doctor."

"But I'm. . . ."

"You are my class enemy?"

"Yes. And you're not obliged to bother with me."

"Your head is full of muck. Slops!" Volodya said angrily, having clean forgotten to mind his p's and q's. "I hope that when we have put you back on your feet you'll have gained more sense, Sir Lionel. By the way, you told me you were no comrade to me. I hardly think the bloke who hauled you on to the rescue raft and was almost drowned doing it, would find this arrogance of yours very much to his liking. With us—all the men who fight together, be they sailors or admirals, are comrades. Well, have a good day."

He walked out, his memory retaining the expression of angry despair in his extraordinary patient's wide-open boyish eyes. In Ward's office, he took a look at the X-rays and frowned.

"Well?" Ward asked.

"The bullet is embedded too near the base of the lung. Can you see it?"

Of course Dr. Ward had seen it. And it was precisely because of this that he considered an operation definitely out.

"Yes, but the danger of a secondary hemorrhage?" Volodya said. "This thing will be there in his lung like a bomb with a delay fuse. It will go off one day, and the hemorrhage will end in catastrophe."

"Let's hope for the best," Ward said without looking at him. "After all, we are mere men."

"I'll be damned if we are!" Volodya suddenly exploded as he unlaced his boots in the intern's room at the naval base hospital where he was staying the night. "Mere men, mere men, mere men!"

In the morning he assisted Kharlamov and thought about his young peer, speculating on when and how that blasted delay-fuse bomb would go off. He was almost certain that it would

go off one day, but he had not yet mastered the art of shutting his eyes to such contingencies and consoling himself with the bromide that "we are mere men."

"You seem out of sorts today, Major," Kharlamov said to him when they were washing their hands. "You haven't fallen in love by any chance?"

Volodya forced a smile, and then found himself telling Kharlamov about his conversation with Ward the night before and his own speculations. The rustic professor, as the envious called Kharlamov, sat down, rubbed his lined and really rustic face with his large hands, and then turned the full light of his intelligent, faded, cornflower-blue eyes on Volodya.

"Yes, yes, yes," he said thoughtfully. "This can't be decided on the spur of the moment. But from my point of view—and I, as you certainly know, am the sort of surgeon who takes risks, the operation should be performed. The analogy is apt. When these very same bombs are rendered harmless by our comrades it inevitably means running a risk, and a big risk at that! Think it over, Major, think hard. And if you need my advice, you're welcome, any time. . . ."

At about twelve, Anyuta the theatre nurse rang Volodya. She kept her voice very low, but she sounded pleased about something.

"It's terribly embarrassing and I'm all in a dither myself. That pilot chap won't let us change his dressings, he'll let no one but you do it. And that other one too, the old mechanic, one of the foreigners. And three others. The pilot is kicking up an awful row, I think he's tight, he finished the whisky he had and someone brought him some more."

"Rubbish. Ward can manage alone today," he said dryly. "It's foolish indulging everyone's caprices."

"You won't come?"

Volodya heard despair in her voice.

"And what would you suggest?"

"I don't know," she said. "Only if you're not coming, I'll run away from here. He says, this pilot chap says, that his admiral will get your commanding officer to order you to come. Our liaison officer here is as run off his feet as I am. . . ."

Volodya again assisted Kharlamov, and when he was having dinner at the canteen he heard the soldier on duty call out: "Message for Surgeon Major Ustimenko!"

He went to the door.

"Are you Ustimenko?" The young and pink-cheeked liaison officer dropped his voice to a whisper, as if he were confiding a great military secret to Volodya, and said: "I'm sorry I had to interrupt your dinner, but they sent me for you urgently. Those wounded allies at the hospital are extremely restive, they're not too fond of their own doctor. They're clamouring for you, their commanding officers have twice approached ours. But you know the set-up yourself."

He did, indeed.

Ward locked himself in his small office and did not even come out to meet Volodya. Anyuta fetched him a white coat and told him that "those English had worn her to a frazzle".

The American sailors were singing a song as they slapped down their cards. They greeted Volodya with short whistles and friendly shouts.

"Well?" Volodya asked, opening the door into Lionel Neville's room. "What have you been up to now?" he asked peering into his narrowed and triumphant eyes. "What's this trouble you've been stirring up? Putting in complaints and all but having hysterics! Not a man's job, surely, Sir Lionel?"

The fifth Earl of Neville was obviously a little hurt.

"There were no hysterics and no trouble was stirred up at all," he said dryly. "I simply stated my demands."

"And just what were they?"

"The *Ottilia* sailors suggested that I . . . Rather, they said that if they were in my place and had my means. . ."

He was already feeling ashamed, and Volodya noticed it.

"Go on, if they had your means, what then?"

"Nothing," he said with a deep frown. "I really can afford to pay you. I'm well off. And then I like you, not you personally, of course, but your knowing your job better than Ward, the conceited ass. You suit me better. I don't like accepting favours from you, especially since you told me yourself that you have enough work. And so I wish to pay you for your services."

Volodya was amused.

"That's interesting," he said, watching the young peer's face. "You'll pay me. For my services. I know from books that in your country one has to become a society doctor to make a career. Does this mean that my career has been made?"

Lionel suddenly blushed a deep red.

"Are you going to pay me much for my services? Generously?"

"I'll pay exactly as much as you put down in your account."

"No tips?"

"Look here, doctor," Lionel exclaimed. "I . . ."

"Never mind. I'll treat your burns, but not because you are 'well off' and someone has advised you to pay me, but because such are my commanding officer's orders. Is that clear?"

Lionel wanted to say something, but Volodya refused to listen.

"Bring Lt. Neville to the X-ray room," he told the nurse in Russian, and went on ahead.

Captain Subbotin, the X-ray man, who was always singing arias from operas very sadly and almost inaudibly, was at the moment humming a melody from *Yevgeny Onegin* as he pored over the X-rays before him.

"But he's been here already," he said when Volodya told him they were bringing in Neville. "Or do you want to have a look at him yourself?"

Lionel was also surprised that the nurse was wheeling him into the X-ray room again.

"The whole thing over again!" he said crossly. "What on earth for?"

"To squeeze a few more pounds out of you," Volodya explained. "It will all go on my bill, you see?"

Subbotin switched off the lights. Two or three minutes passed in silence.

And then Lionel said. "Don't think I'll pay you a penny for the time we've wasted here in the dark. D'you hear me, doc?"

Volodya was smiling. The fifth Earl of Neville had made himself ridiculous offering him a fee, and was now slyly pretending it was simply a joke they shared. Never mind, he'd make him eat his words yet!

"Please turn him more to the right," Volodya asked Subbotin. "More, a little more."

Lionel moaned in short gasps. It hurt, it hurt very much. Volodya knew how much it hurt: there was the bullet, which he saw plainly, and also two broken ribs, the third and the fourth.

"You'll have to bear it a little longer, Sir Lionel. Please!" Volodya said gently. "It can't be helped, I've got to see everything for myself."

"And what do you see?"

"I see your heart, for one thing."

"And how is it?"

"It's a 100 HP motor and it pulls beautifully."

"But the ribs are shot to hell. Right?"

"We'll easily patch your ribs up."

"Can you see that damned Boche's bullet?"

"Yes I can." And to Subbotin he said in Russian: "It's close to the base of the right lung, a little higher, see?"

Subbotin went on humming thoughtfully.

"Too close, much too close," he answered slowly, as if replying to Ustimenko's thoughts. "Quite close. And besides, there's blood in the pleura. . . ."

Volodya straightened up, asked Subbotin to have the X-ray ready for him, and walked out of the room. In the corridor he found Dr. Ward, smoking a cigarette.

"Only yesterday you yourself feared there might be a hemorrhage, and today you twist and turn him for your own schemes," Ward said with a polite smile, but his tone was rude. "It's not really safe, doctor."

"With your permission, we'll talk about it later," Volodya said. The words "with your permission" were added for the sake of diplomacy.

From the X-ray room Lionel was taken to the theatre. Sweat poured down his face, but he still attempted to joke.

"You really have been pushing me about," he said, running his tongue over his lips. "All I had to do was promise you money, and things began to move. The Americans were right, after all."

"Yes, money can do anything," Volodya said. "I hear that one can even buy a title for money. Now supposing I become, say, a marquis. . . ."

Lionel jerked. The needle had gone in quickly, and now Volodya was slowly releasing his thumb on the plunger.

"Are you going to operate?"

"Oh no. Some blood has collected in the pleura and I'm drawing it out."

"Will it cost much?"

"I'll be decent about it," Volodya said. "We're allies, it's all in the family. Or maybe I'll do it your way, on credit."

After that he changed the dressings. The pain was bad enough but Lionel endured it stoically, although tears did well up in his eyes wide open, so they would not spill over.

And only when he was back in his room did he say in complaint: "You put me to quite a bit of torture today, doc."

"I had to. I had to have the whole thing clear."

"And have you now?"

"I'll think it over."

"And I'll have a drink. Would you like some whisky? I have some excellent Scotch. . . ."

Volodya refused a drink. He had to go and have another talk with Ward. Arguing with him would be hopeless, judging by the way their conversation had gone the day before, but he had to try, he did not have the right to give up.

"Cigar, coffee?" Ward asked him when he walked into the small office.

The X-rays hanging in front of the screen were still wet. Subbotin must have brought them here, Volodya thought.

"They're Lieutenant Neville's," Ward said with a sigh to suit the occasion, and gave Volodya a big cup of black coffee. "Not very hopeful, I'm afraid."

Volodya examined the X-rays one after the other: there were three of them. No, they were not very hopeful.

"Most unpleasant X-rays," Ward said, but from his tone one could assume that he meant the exact opposite: X-rays such as these suited him perfectly since they supported his view. "I'm sorry for the boy, of course. They're a very wealthy family. There were five sons—Lionel is the youngest. The sole heir to a great fortune. . . ."

There was a dreamy expression in Ward's eyes.

"A great fortune," Ward said, caressing this unattainable great fortune with his voice. "The mother has lost all sense of values, the poor woman is almost insane. She has the table laid for five, as if all of them were alive and are to have lunch with her. Their father, the late Brigadier, has long been forgotten, but the dead boys are always there with her. You see, those boys took the war as a great sport, a kind of Olympics or something like it. A drop of brandy, doctor?"

No, he didn't want any brandy.

A thin, dreary spring rain that never seemed to stop was pattering against the plywood nailed over the windowpanes. That was why it was so quiet. If it were not for the pall of rain and mist, the Germans would have made a sally. Spring rain, summer rain, autumn rain! It was always raining here. . . .

"Let us get back to the matter in hand," Volodya said after a pause. "In my opinion, the operation must be performed."

"Under no circumstances!" Ward exclaimed.

"Listen to what I have to say first."

"I have not been empowered to decide," Ward said with dignity. "I cannot decide in these matters."

"But since I've been called in, you have to know my point of view," Volodya said deliberately.

Ward put on a resigned expression which, nonetheless, held a hint of defiance. He was objecting in advance, and although he had absolutely no point of view of his own, he was prepared to object, just in case. By the look on his face and his whole attitude he asserted his independent way of thinking and his non-existent point of view.

"The bullet is here, at the very base of the lung," Volodya said slowly and earnestly, holding up the X-ray so Ward could also see the position of the large-calibre bullet. "Can you see it? Even a child knows that the closer a foreign body lies to the base of the lung, the greater the risk and difficulty of removing it. But on the other hand, because this bullet is lodged where it is it vastly increases the danger of a secondary hemorrhage. Don't you think so?"

Dr. Ward made a sound with his lips that could equally mean either negation or affirmation.

"Secondary hemorrhages are undoubtedly dangerous," Volodya said. "Right? They may, and not only may but in all probability will lead to catastrophe. An operation—dangerous, difficult and complicated though it would be—is not absolutely impossible. On the contrary, it may be a complete success provided the patient is in a good condition generally. Therefore, I consider that refusal to have the operation performed is more dangerous than the operation itself."

"You're putting it very strongly, doctor," said Ward.

Volodya did not say anything.

"Personally, I'd never attempt it," Ward persisted. "Removing a bullet from a lung is dangerous, and especially so in the early stages. It's extremely dangerous, and we are not recommended to do it."

"Not recommended by whom?"

"By those who taught me."

"You were taught in peacetime," Volodya said. "And it was mostly peacetime professors who taught you. I know from our doctors' experience that the risk involved in operating on the lung is greatly exaggerated. And as for the conservative treat-

ment of secondary hemorrhages, true in the case of limbs, it's. . . ."

"Limbs don't prove anything!" Dr. Ward said tartly. "Not a thing. But the death of the fifth Earl of Neville on my operating table would be my death as well. And no amount of experience of Russian surgeons, and on limbs at that, will help me any. I hope you agree with me on this anyway?"

"General Kharlamov, the Fleet Surgeon will not refuse to operate on Neville," Volodya said. "I do realise that my age. . . ."

"Oh no, doctor!" Ward cooed. "We think very highly of your ability and experience. But this is a matter of principle, you see."

"Yes, I dare say it is," Volodya said, getting up. "I suppose that's what it really is. And that is why it is so difficult. But maybe you could get permission from your own medical authorities? You should inform them of both your and our points of view."

"Do you want to bring General Kharlamov here?"

"Yes, why not?"

Ward blinked rapidly in alarm.

"Naturally, I'll be very glad, but Sir Lionel, of course, must not know. He's so headstrong, he may insist. . . ."

"All right. We won't tell him anything. General Kharlamov and Dr. Levin will have a look at him and tell you what they think."

And this was most probably when he made his unpardonable, tragic mistake. He left the hospital without first going in to see Lionel and telling him what he thought about the chances of an operation.

Undoubtedly there were the conventions and the pertinent rules, the etiquette of medical procedure evolved in the course of centuries—this was ethical and that was not, this was correct behaviour and that should not be done, this the patient may be told and that must be kept from him. But in this case the matter concerned not the patient so much as Dr. Ward and his career.

All those international rules, that *persona grata* stuff and all the other diplomatic subtleties were the very devil, of course. But even so, and tricky though the matter was, he ought to have gone to his patient's room and said:

"Look here, Sir Lionel. You feel well at the moment. You think you are getting better. But death is lurking inside you. It may not be tomorrow or the day after tomorrow, but when you

die it will almost certainly be because of that bullet in you. If we operate—think well before you give your answer—if we remove the bullet and the operation goes well, you will be a perfectly healthy young man again. Perfectly, do you understand? True, the operation will be dangerous and risky. You may even die. You may! But I expect everything will be all right. It's up to you to decide."

This, he supposed, was what he should have done.

But etiquette did not allow it.

It wasn't done.

The patient must not be alarmed.

You were supposed to lie to him, to defer to the opinion of people like Ward who worried more about their own career than their patient's life.

And so, without going in to see his young lordship, Ustimenko went down to the pier and boarded the outgoing launch. That same evening found him sitting in Captain Stepanov's stateroom on the *Svetly*, eating bread and butter, drinking good strong tea, and telling him about his disagreements with Ward, about Lionel Richard Charles Gay, fifth Earl of Neville, about the bullet lodged at the base of his lung and the threat that hung over this boy with the heart of a young lion.

"It's not as simple as it sounds, of course, Rodion Mefodyevich, but what riles me is the sense of helplessness in the face of this careful playing for safety. I simply felt lost. Talking to Ward is a waste of breath. They see everything differently from us. The wrong way round, or something. . . ."

"Yes, they do," Stepanov agreed reflectively. "You said it: the wrong way round. . . ."

Amirajibi, How You Exaggerate!

A little later, just as Volodya finished having a shower and a shave, Captain Amirajibi dropped in.

"I wanted to bring a bottle of brandy," he said, shaking hands, "but my Chief Officer Petrokovsky is a man of steel. True, we have more or less agreed on what each of us has to do: I am the kind soul, the jolly good fellow, the sucker in other words. And he is the economist. The miser! We decided to do it this way, because if we didn't my entire ship would be laid waste. And so he, George, Yegor Stepanovich his name is, put his foot down. Guests were welcome, he said, all we had was theirs

to drink, but it had to be drunk there and not taken out. He says he can't spare a bottle every time I go calling because I go calling too often. This bottle of gin is all I could manage to steal out of my stateroom, and I had to outwit George to do it. He's a tyrant, but a bit of a sap too. That's how I get by...."

"What about some nice, cold vodka, friends?" Rodion said. "I have a bottle I've been saving. And there are some sort of tins too. We'll get everything lined up in no time...."

The stateroom was warm and cosy. A raw wind was whistling outside, seagulls were crying shrilly, and from the pier, where in spite of the bad weather the sailors were dancing with their girls, came the strains of a slow waltz.

"War's a funny thing," Rodion said, as he set out the glasses. "Out at sea you get it tough and here suddenly there's this old waltz...."

"The *Hills of Manchuria* isn't it?" Amirajibi asked, waving gently in time to the music.

"Lovely," he said with a sigh when the waltz came to an end. "Why does the waltz appeal to seamen particularly, Rodion, more than to anyone else?"

"Because, I suppose, absence makes the heart grow fonder," Rodion said vaguely, his thoughts on something else, but he recovered himself at once and invited his guests to the table.

"Do me the honour," he said in the way he had been saying it for years on his ships, and to Volodya the invitation made the room more homelike still.

Amirajibi smiled.

"When I asked my wife to marry me," he said to Volodya, "she wasn't my wife at the time, of course, among the arguments in my favour—not very convincing ones, I'm afraid—I advanced one which decided the outcome of my fiery, passionate but hardly ingenious proposal. I said to her: 'Tassya, dear Tassya! (she's Russian, Anastasia Vasilyevna her name is). Tassya dear!' I said, and held out to her a warm, squashed pear which had become heated to steel-smelting point in my pocket. 'Tassya dear,' I said. 'We sailors always long to come home to our wives because we don't see them for months at a time. We are madly in love with them because we don't know the everyday of marriage, we know only its holidays.' Get the idea, Rodion? Do you see my point, doctor? To the husband the wife means a holiday, and to the wife the husband means that, too. He never tells her that she has put too much salt in the soup, and she never nags that

he has forgotten to shave again. 'Don't shave,' she says. 'Don't waste your time on shaving.' And he says: 'Salty soup is just what I like best! Soup simply isn't soup unless it has plenty of salt in it!'"

"Has it worked out like that?" Volodya asked.

"Very nearly. She wanted to divorce me several times, but then, when we both grew a little older and greyer, Tassya appreciated the great romance of it. She is not sorry any more that she accepted that hot, squashy pear from me and ate it on the wharf in Odessa where she came to see me off."

"What about the time you were in prison?"

"My Tassya found Rodion, and then she gave me a great home-coming, as if I'd been on a rather difficult voyage. There was an excellent dinner, with *satsivi* the way I like it, and *basturma* and other dishes she had learnt to cook in my home, in Kakhethia. But she did cry more than usual. Isn't it amazing, Rodion, that seamen's wives always cry when their husbands come home, now why. . . ."

He raised his glass and proposed a toast to Aglaya Petrovna and Anastasia Vasilyevna. Then he glanced at Volodya.

"He's a bachelor," Rodion said, intercepting the look. "No wife to drink to yet. Let him drink to ours."

During dinner the conversation turned to the fifth Earl of Neville again, and then drifted to allies in general.

"It's not all plain and simple here either," Rodion said, suddenly angry. "They have some really excellent people, but there are others that seem bent on doing everything to hinder, frustrate and ruin everything. On my ship, we call such people 'lambs in the grass'. Some of the officers are rotten and a disgrace to their people. The other day a bunch of those young bloods approached their C.O. and demanded to know how much longer it would be before the problem of brothels for seamen was finally settled? Can you imagine anyone making a request of this sort?"

Rodion got up, lit a cigarette, and paced up and down the room.

"Why seethe, Rodion dear?" Amirajibi said, glancing up at his friend. "It's all perfectly natural for those types, not for the people, of course. The sailors are doing all they can and even more, but have those who betrayed the interests of England in Munich been removed from office? Have they been stripped of their power? Of course not! And they are giving us a demonstration of their efforts directed towards anything but letting us have

what we need so badly. I'm not a diplomat, nor am I a historian, I'm just a labourer in this war like all the rest of us, but I can't speak differently because I've seen it with my own eyes. I've seen them scuttling troopships which could easily have stayed afloat. And I can't bow to them and smile to them and sign my letters 'yours respectfully'. No, I'm not blaming the sailors, the British Navy is famous for its sailors. What I am blaming is some of their instructions. I'll give you an instance if you like: in this convoy we suffered incomparably greater damage than what they term fatal, and yet we plodded home and got here. We beat off thirty-nine air attacks in the course of seventy-two hours. And when a fire broke out on the forecastle after a hit from a bomb the fascists thought they could finish us off. After that we were too busy to count their attacks. We had to fight on two fronts, so to speak—the planes and the fire. The commander of the convoy informed us that according to instructions we were to scuttle the damaged ship, and suggested that the *Pushkin* crew should abandon her and come aboard the escort ship. My Petrokovsky made a fitting reply. I still don't know what exactly he said, but I expect we'll have to do some explaining to our High Command about being discourteous to our allies. But those instructions, composed by one of the Lords of the Admiralty I suppose, had no power over us. It took us twenty-four hours to put out the fires and repair the damage. I was stone deaf at the time, and I suppose I only got in everyone's way, so none of the credit is due to me, I'm not bragging, you understand. And when we finally caught up with the convoy, we received a dry enough greeting and as dry a message of congratulations from the Admiralty."

"What imbecility!" Volodya exclaimed.

"Why imbecility?" Amirajibi was surprised and a little angered. "Strange that such simple things should call for comment. Funny, really. Rodion, you saw the *Edinburgh* disaster with your own eyes. Tell your nephew about it, he's not a gossip sort, he won't drive a wedge into our relations with our dear allies. . . ."

"What is there to tell," Rodion smiled grimly. "It's all very simple. Only, Volodya, you really must keep this under your hat, it's a delicate matter, high diplomacy. Well then, the Germans attacked the *Edinburgh* and damaged her stern. Actually, she only lost her screw propellers and rudder. We might have easily towed her. In fact that's what we suggested doing..

What a hope! They transferred the crew to the destroyer and finished the *Edinburgh* off. Scuttled her with her cargo of gold with which we pay them for military supplies. They sank ten tons of gold, a hundred million rubles, people who know tell me. And now, of course, the whole world is shouting: there's no getting through to them, it's hopeless to attempt, look even the *Edinburgh* went down! Who sank her, I ask you? Oh, to hell with the whole bloody lot of them. You know, they open fire on the pilots who parachute down into the sea from their burning planes. I personally voiced strong objections to the practice on the two occasions when they invited us. What's so dangerous about a pilot who's parachuting down into our hands and in the middle of the ocean too? Even a German has his uses, so we take him alive. They managed to kill four of their own by mistake, it's a wonder that earl of yours wasn't shot down. We don't know everything yet, we'll find out when we've finished fighting. But even then, it's a question of when. . . ."

"So far we know what we see," Amirajibi said calmly, pouring out the vodka. "And it is quite a lot. Even what we do see with our own eyes makes us think, doesn't it? But do you know what I find most discouraging? It's the thought that after the war, when everything is known, when the 'lambs in the grass' have published their memoirs, and we, who saw it all will say that they are distorting the truth, to put it mildly—there still will be simpletons or excessively good souls, and such people exist, who will believe them. They'll say to me: 'Amirajibi, you're an old fool. How you do exaggerate! They're splendid chaps—the English and all the others, they did all they could. So keep your mouth shut, old Elisbar, it's none of your business, don't meddle!' That's what they'll say to me, and to hear them say it will hurt. Especially coming from those who never went near the war."

"Oh those, they're sure to say it!" Rodion said.

"Why 'lambs in the grass'? Volodya asked, as though startled awake. "Whom do you mean?"

"Have you ever heard anything about the minelayer *Adventure*?"

"It's the lambs in the grass who sent *Adventure* to us," Amirajibi said with a short, angry chuckle. "Right, Rodion?"

Rodion nodded, and lit another cigarette. Volodya noticed that he had become a chain smoker, although in the old days he rarely had a cigarette, and also that he refilled his own vodka

glass more often than he did theirs. "Like Bogoslovsky," he thought with bitterness. "And there's nothing one can say."

"The mines which the *Adventure* brought here," Amirajibi was saying, "were magnetic mines, suitable only for depths of no more than twenty or twenty-five metres, and quite useless in our theatre. I think it was the 'lambs in the grass' who sent that shipment to us. But the crew of the ship risked their lives to deliver us the junk. The lads can't be blamed for anything. I only wonder how they'd act if they knew that they were carrying duds, dummies, and that unwittingly they were giving 'the raspberry' to the very people who had taken upon themselves the brunt of the war. . . ."

He opened the gin he had stolen from his stateroom and sniffed it.

"Let's not talk about it any more," he said. "I'm not easily ruffled, I'm not a young man, and I can control my emotions, but even so my gall rises sometimes. Well, Vladimir Afanasyevich, there it is. Feeling sad?"

"Rotten," Volodya said.

"He's a straight, honest fellow," Rodion said. "He can barely distinguish between the various degrees of vileness. Oh well, he's young, but look at me. I'm old enough to be his father, and I still can't get used to it."

"I'm not inviting you to get used to it," Amirajibi said sharply. "On the contrary, I'm asking you to cheer up, let's tell jokes, shall we? Good, funny jokes, and have a laugh for a change! What do you say?"

But they never got as far as the jokes, because just then German bombers were sighted approaching the town and the harbour and were liable to come here as well. Rodion went up to his bridge. Amirajibi pulled on his rustling raincoat and hurried down to catch the last launch going out that night. Volodya, left alone, lay down on the sofa and folded his arms above his head.

And immediately the gloom lifted and he felt serene.

He wondered why, and starting up drew a long happy sigh: there, on the wall facing him, hung a large picture of Varya. She was looking down at him with her wide-open eyes, her gaze was so trusting and pure, and she seemed to be saying: "Come on, what's the matter with you, Volodya? Where are you? I'm right here, can't you see?"

The Operation Can and Must Be Performed

In the morning Volodya and Kharlamov went to Levin's hospital, had some tea with cranberry juice, and then operated until noon. After that, Volodya gave a lecture to the feldshers and nurses from the reinforcement group on how to treat frost-bite cases, and then he and Kharlamov examined patients suffering from burns at the latter's naval base hospital. By the time Volodya got back to town, the fat was in the fire. The cable from London had already come. To be on the safe side the conscientious Dr. Ward had asked his medical superiors to sanction the operation. Judging from the answer, the request had been worded objectively enough. The refusal, couched in dignified terms, coming from the heights of academic super-knowledge and super-science, was absolutely flat. And someone called Torpenthow also objected to "any radical intervention."

"Who is this Torpenthow?" Volodya asked.

"His uncle," Ward told him. "He's now the head of the family."

"A doctor?"

"No, why? He's a general, he was in the Indian Service for many years."

"Oh, India, I see," Volodya said, as if this explained everything.

He only remembered then that he had promised to meet Kharlamov and Levin. Of course, it was pointless now, but it was too late to head them off.

When he came into Lionel's room he found him listening to the music coming from the radio out in the corridor.

"It's Shostakovich!" the boy said, a look of eager and happy absorption on his face.

Running his fingers over the blanket as if it were a keyboard, he shut his eyes tight, and his face trembled with excitement. The symphony was over, but he did not speak at once.

"Well?" he sounded triumphant. "And it was written by a man in glasses, the sort of glasses our Dr. Ward wears. How d'you like that, eh? And he's there, in Leningrad now, putting out fires, Shostakovich is, I've seen a picture of him. Ah, that part—those Germans—he's got everything there: Dunkirk, the air battle over London, and even before that—Munich with their tankards of beer!"

Now whistling softly, now humming, now drumming with his fingers on the bedside table, he reproduced the part of the symphony he liked so much.

Major-General Kharlamov and Lieutenant-Colonel Levin came into the room just as Lionel was telling Volodya that he, too did a bit of composing and what "masterpieces" he had already produced. Volodya was watching the boy, whose curly fair hair had grown too long at the front and sides, with involuntary admiration. He was so taken with him that he did not notice Kharlamov come in—walking a little sideways, a manner much derided by the envious for its supposed lack of dignity, and looking slightly embarrassed by his high rank—followed by the sallow-faced, big-nosed, croaking Levin, with the skirts of his white coat flying. From their three faces (Ward kept pushing his way in between Kharlamov and Levin) Volodya knew at once that they had already had a talk about the exchange of telegrams, and that Kharlamov was in that state of controlled, even humbled ferocity which always struck such terror into the hearts of his subordinates.

The examination took only about ten minutes. The lean, pug-nosed, minutely lined face of the "uncultured" professor, as the spiteful called him, expressed nothing except, perhaps, the calm satisfaction of one who has decided on the wording of the final and irrevocable judgment he would pronounce. Lightly, he exchanged a few highly optimistic remarks with the old and wise Levin. The troubled expression in Lionel's eyes gave way to a mischievous twinkle. Volodya was thinking that there were no greater or finer actors in the world than doctors like Kharlamov and Levin who gave these incomparable performances to help the human spirit master the fear of impending death.

"And so, my dear friend, get well now," Kharlamov said in good, quite fluent French, with a faint Volga accent. "Everything's going well. What you want now is composure, patience, a sense of humour, which I believe is a characteristic of you English, and a good appetite. . . ."

"And a little whisky?" Neville asked.

"Why not? You can have whisky, too."

"Hear it, doc?" he beamed at Volodya. "Hear it? The professor himself. . . ."

The four doctors sat down to talk in Ward's little office.

"Actually, there was no real sense in our coming here," Kharlamov said in a slightly quivering voice. "Mr. Ward has secured

for himself, and consequently for us as well, orders forbidding him to act."

Ward spread out his hands a little, thus giving them to understand that he could not follow the French.

Suddenly Kharlamov saw red. He gave way to these fits of temper sometimes, even though he might be perfectly docile for a whole month or more. And this happened to be one of his "streaky" days, as he afterwards admitted to Volodya.

"Mr. Ward and his bosses over there," he swung his arm in the direction where he supposed England lay, "are fondly hoping that the bullet will become encapsulated and give no trouble for years. They refuse to understand that the purpose of this operation is not so much the removal of the foreign body as a measure to preclude further bleeding. In the event of a copious secondary hemorrhage chances for a successful operation will be reduced to practically nil. Translate it for him, Major."

Volodya interpreted it just any old how. What was the use? What good would it do? Ward listened, twitching and shrugging his shoulders.

"I'm warning you," Kharlamov's voice rose to a falsetto. "I'm warning you, that just now the patient's condition is good, he can and must be operated on this very day. A secondary hemorrhage will exclude an operation altogether."

Ward heard the translation and again sighed.

After seeing Kharlamov and Levin off, Volodya remained in the hall for a little while, trying to collect his thoughts, and then went back to Neville.

"He's a sport, that professor of yours. I expect he's good at his job. Where's he from?"

"He? I think I should tell you all about him."

And, trying to keep his mind on the subject, Volodya began to tell him about Professor Kharlamov. Some English and American sailors, including the invariably drunken mechanic from the *St. Michael*, were in the room, chewing gum and smoking. They all listened to what Volodya was saying. Before the Revolution, Kharlamov—then a poor, orphaned kid with no home or family—had been a bread-delivery boy in Moscow, carrying a huge basket of loaves on his head. And then he had fought in the civil war. As a matter of fact, he fought right here in the north, where the English troops landed—it just shows you that you never know. He attended to the wounded, treating them as best he could and with what he had. . . ."

"With loaves of bread," the drunken mechanic jeered.

"No, we had no bread. You had it," Volodya said severely and incisively. "And after that, Kharlamov went to school."

"Where did he get the money?" a short and skinny sailor asked.

"From the state of workers and peasants."

Lionel was looking at Volodya with attentive, faintly mocking eyes.

"You're a commissar besides, I see," he said to him at parting.

"Certainly," Volodya said, smiling. "A doctor who can't be a commissar, even though it's not required of him, is worth damn little. Behave yourself, Sir Lionel, I'll be coming to see you again soon."

He left the hospital without bothering to say good-bye to Ward.

He felt too disgusted, and knew only too well how it would all end.

However, he foresaw far from everything.

Could anyone, at this stage, have foreseen in detail how events would develop?

* * *

"Can I go home?" Volodya asked, blowing hard into the telephone.

"Yes, I suppose so," Kharlamov answered. "How did you like that bird?"

Volodya said nothing. He wanted to sleep.

"Go and see your pilot again if you have time," Kharlamov said. "There's something appealing about that boy. Can you hear me, Major?"

"Yes."

"Alright. Go home! Going by launch?"

"As far as the main base, and from there I'll catch one going my way."

"Good."

Levin also said a few words to him on the phone.

Volodya got no chance to sleep on the launch: there was not a vacant seat, and for three solid hours he stood leaning against a warm funnel, sighing and moping. Rain was rustling, seagulls were crying—how fed up he was with everything! Everybody felt the same—fed up. That old Warrant Officer over there was fed up, and someone's wife with a kid was fed up, and he, Volodya Ustimenko, was fed up! It was one thing when you were

doing something useful, but when you were moping behind a funnel, or waiting for a launch going your way, or starting for somewhere knowing that you'd spend longer just waiting about than actually travelling. . . .

"Rank disorder!" exclaimed an irritable voice behind him. Volodya did not even turn round to look at the speaker.

As if the meaning of the word "war" had any room for the concept "order"! War itself was above all else a disorder.

It was already evening when he finally reached his hospital, which for him had all the sweetness of home. He asked and was told that nothing new had happened in his absence, ate a huge meal that left him gasping, and with a thought of glad wonder that, contrary to his reasoning, there was, in fact, order in his hospital, instantly fell asleep.

The wounded were brought in in the middle of the night. Volodya stood for a minute or two outside his dugout, quite unable to rouse himself completely; he yawned, shivered and listened to the sounds about him. There was heavy gun fire down below by the sea, somewhere near Topkaya Bay, and in the grey, damp sky a German *Arrado* was zooming tiresomely—what did it want there anyway?

"We're in for a bit of strife again, aren't we? What do you say, Comrade Major?" asked Captain Shapiro, running past along the slushy path.

Volodya did not answer.

He heard the throbbing of a motor in the darkness of the drive.

"Where are you from?" Volodya asked the driver who was hooking up the sides of his truck.

"From the old pier. Engineer battalion casualties. They were building a road through Gubin cliff, the Fritz got wise and gave them the works."

It was hot in the changing room. The generator was already working, and the lamps were glowing. "How does he manage so quickly?" Volodya thought of Mityashin with respect. "They've just lifted the wounded from the truck, and he's got everything fixed already!"

Pressing the pedal of the wash-stand, he began the usual hand-scrubbing routine. Behind him, the wounded were carried past on stretchers.

"What d'you think you're doing—carrying people in feet first, you sleepy fools! Wake up!" Mityashin shouted angrily.

"Nothing misses the man!" Volodya marvelled again.

When he had done his five-minute scrubbing, he put down his brushes and held out his hands to Nora Yartseva to pour an ammonia solution on them. It wouldn't pour.

"They've brought a girl in, she's so pretty!" Nora said.

"Pour!" Volodya ordered sharply.

After rubbing his hands with methylated spirit, he came to the operating table and, squinting in the glaring light of the low-hanging lamp, examined the wound, completely forgetting in his concentration what Nora had said about there being a girl among the wounded. All he registered was a moment's surprise at the sight of the small, pink ear, and the ringlets of copper-coloured hair which Nora, whining plaintively, was now snipping off from the back of the patient's head.

"The pulse is thready," Vera Veresova warned him.

He made no comment, thinking deeply. A fleeting, habitually nostalgic thought of Ashkhen passed through his mind, and then Surgeon Major Ustimenko began to issue orders in a hard voice that brooked no argument.

Every surgeon in the course of his lifetime experiences moments when his eyesight, brain and hands attain supreme harmony, when his mind serves him brilliantly, when the surrounding trivia vanish completely and all is subordinated to one thing alone—the duel between human knowledge and genius and the vapid idiocy of death, standing there already.

Science, like true art, dislikes the word inspiration. But no one will deny that unique, incomparable state of alertness and at the same time aloofness, that joyous concentration of the mind's confident effort, and the quickening of all one's faculties, which are given man to know in those moments when he is performing the work of his life.

Death stood right there, the Grim Reaper, blind, senseless, and odious in his cretinous doggedness. Volodya heard his voice in the discreet warnings of the anaesthetist; it was he, the Reaper, who had turned the blood away from the small pink ear and made it a bluish-white, it was he who was playing tricks with the pulse; it was his gleeful tittering Volodya heard when sweat poured into his eyes, when the generator suddenly began to slow down and candles had to be brought in; it was his vile gloating and rejoicing Volodya sensed when Dr. Shapiro made an awkward move and their efforts all but ended in disaster.

But Ustimenko knew the Reaper's underhand methods, he knew how strong and crafty he was just as he knew and appreciated his own power and capabilities. And when you come to think of it, he was not standing there, by the operating table, all by himself—although he did not realise it or give it a thought, he had with him that night his teacher Bogoslovsky, old Ashkhen who always scolded him, Zina, Postnikov, Polunin, and men he had never seen but whom he knew to be his true, good mentors: Spasokukotsky, Burdenko, Djanelidze, Vishnevsky....

They were all there together, the living and the deceased, it was a war council, and it was he, a rank-and-file doctor, who commanded the battle. And, like a true commander leading his armies into the fray, he was prepared to counter the enemy's possible flanking moves, subsequent rear attacks, pincers, fire pockets and other unforeseen and treacherous manoeuvres. He used more than sight, with the help of his war council he used foresight as well, and now, at long last, came the glorious moment when he no longer had to worry about the enemy's involved and tricky schemes.

The small car turned pink once more, the pulse became even, the breathing calm and deep. The hideous Reaper with his empty eye-sockets and his rusty scythe got nothing for his pains that night. The operation was over.

Nurse Kondoshina said weakly: "It was fantastic ... Djanelidze himself...."

"As a matter of fact, he helped me a lot tonight, your Djanelidze," Volodya interrupted her in a low voice.

He was sitting on a stool, forgetful of the need to remove his gauze mask, his mind was foggy, and he had a sensation of being completely empty. He was all trembling inside from his terrible exertion.

It was precisely at that moment that he recognised Varya.

Her breathing was calm, she had not recovered consciousness yet. Her parched lips, bitten till they bled, twitched now and again. Her glassy eyes still stared with dismay.

"My God!" Volodya gasped. "My God!"

He did not will the words. He was not staggered in the least. He was simply surprised, and nothing else. He was too empty just then, the fight for the life of this critically wounded patient had taken too much out of him, and he had nothing left for Varya personally....

"Is she a friend of yours?" Vera asked.

"Yes," he answered reluctantly.

"She came here once in March," Vera said unpleasantly. "I think I forgot to tell you."

"In March? Way back in March?"

"Yes, that's right, I'd just started working here. But lots of people come to see you. . . . Anyone might forget. . . . Oh, all right kill me for it! Or lock me up in the guardhouse!"

Her beautiful serene eyes were mocking, and her lips were smiling. Even here she wore lipstick. And a little curl was made to peep out from under her cap. Volodya turned away.

"Way back in March," he said to himself. "Why, that was before I saw her father on the *Svetly*. That's how long ago she had found me. . . ."

Shapiro was operating on the table to the left of Vera, and Veresova to the right of him. Volodya sat hunched on his stool, thinking. Vera operated just like Ward. The two of them had something in common. Was it self-assurance?

"Needle!" she ordered.

"Why don't you go outside?" Shapiro said to him. "You look all in. . . ."

Vera also advised him to go and rest, but he stayed on. He made it a rule to stay even if there were no serious cases. It was Ashkhen's training, and this underground operating theatre would always remain hers.

He did not leave until after seven in the morning, and then he sat down on a bench at the foot of the cliff and smoked a cigarette. It was very damp and chilly there, and suddenly he received a jolt: Varya! Varya Stepanova! She was alive, she had tried to find him! And now he had pulled her out of those dread clutches. Her—Varya!

Light-headed with happiness he leapt up the slippery steps and pulled wide open the heavy, rain-sodden door of his dugout.

There—sitting at the table in a pose that was rather showily relaxed and at the same time arrogant, was a stranger, a lieutenant-colonel, whose service coat, with the collar undone, glittered with orders and medals, and who at that precise moment was pouring himself a glass of German rum. His tan leather raglan coat was slung on one shoulder, his chamois gloves he had dropped on the floor, his leather pouch lay on a stool—and this

disarray also struck Volodya as premeditated, an affectation, a style.

"You're Ustimenko?" the Lieutenant-Colonel asked in an offhand but amiable manner.

"Yes, I'm Ustimenko," Volodya replied, dreading something but not knowing what.

"My name is Kozyrev," the man said, giving Volodya a dry and very strong hand. "Glad to meet you. One of our young ladies got hit, she insisted that I bring her to you, and so I did. What are you, another Kupriyanov or Akhutin, or what?"

Volodya did not speak. He was looking intently, with sullen dislike, at the man's handsome though not very young face. And suddenly he remembered the expression on Rodion Mefodyevich's face that night on the *Svetly* when he mentioned Varya, it was as if a shadow had flitted across his clean-shaven, weather-beaten cheeks. What had caused it? The thought of this Kozyrev, perhaps?

"You got through the operation safely, better say normally, that's how we'll define it, let's not tempt fate," Kozyrev continued, filling a tin mug with rum for Volodya, probably. "My scouts told me, I'll confess it to you, friend. Kozyrev has his own people everywhere. Now then, granted that everything's in order at this given stage, what's coming?"

"What's coming?" Volodya pushed out the words with an effort.

"What's going to happen now to this girl of mine, to my lieutenant? What's the prognosis? I'll tell you frankly, Comrade Medical Officer, Varya is the closest person to me, without going into details. She couldn't be closer, and the rest you can work out for yourself, you're not a child. War is war, we're all human, and if something is not quite usual, who's to judge?"

Volodya still said nothing. A difficult, hurt awareness appeared in his staring, puzzled eyes for a moment, and was gone. Kozyrev did not notice. He was busy choosing words that would sound really beautiful. At last he hit on what he thought best described his feelings.

"She's my firebird. Do you understand? And if you don't, have some rum: it's foul, but you haven't offered me a drink. Ah well, calling on good folk with his own food and drink seems to be Lieutenant-Colonel Kozyrev's lot. . . ."

He fell into a brooding silence. Then, wiping away a tear with his finger, he jerked his shoulder and said: "Forgive me. Things

must be bad when they wring tears from a man. I've been hit hard, believe me, doctor. Sure I took a drink. Who'll be called to answer for the battalion's casualties? None other than Lieutenant-Colonel Kozyrev. A sapper's first mistake is his last. I'm a sapper, I made a mistake, now judge me. . . ."

"You make too much noise building that road," Volodya said quietly but with animosity. "Plain heroics! It's been a wonder to us for a long time how you got away with it. . . ."

He had not meant to speak just then of what the patients had told him, but this lieutenant-colonel with his affectations, his "hard-wrung" tears and his firebird had roused him to such a pitch of bitter hatred that he had not been able to restrain himself. To his amazement, Kozyrev took his words in the spirit of a friendly rebuke.

"You've said it! It's true. Couldn't be better put, you hit the bull's-eye there. But I, my dear doctor, I believe in taking great risks, you see, and I have acquired prestige for it already in the Finnish war. It got me recognition, and not just in words either. . . ."

He moved his shoulders in a peculiar way, and all his orders and medals jingled and flashed in the candlelight simultaneously.

"I've been rewarded! But this time I wasn't so lucky. And to think that my Varya, of all people, got stuck there. I shouldn't have sent her, but on the other hand I couldn't not send her, seeing that our relations are well known, too well known I'd say, to everyone in the unit. Use your head, try to see my side of it, what could I do? And she herself insisted, duty called her, she said. She insisted. So if I had refused to let her go, people would have jumped at the chance to stick their knives into me and there would have been all sorts of talk about politics and morals and what have you."

He took another draught of rum.

"Will she live?" he asked suddenly.

"I don't know," Volodya replied morosely.

"Maybe we should bring in someone with more sense?" Kozyrev asked offensively with a crooked smile. "Seeing that you don't know a thing yourself yet? I've got connections in the medical world . . . I can afford to take her to Kharlamov even. . . ."

"Go ahead, take her to him," Volodya said, getting up. "Only do it this minute, I want to go to bed, I've got to start work again soon. . . ."

He had to be alone, the need for privacy was dire. He could not stand the sound of that hoarse, smug voice any longer, he could not stand the sight of the man swishing his rum round inside the glass. He simply had no strength left for anything at all. . . .

Kozyrev took so endlessly long collecting his things that it seemed he would never go. In the doorway he turned and said stiffly, with drunken severity: "I'll thank you to see that my patient is treated properly."

"We make no distinction between our patients," Volodya answered hollowly.

And he lay down.

But even falling asleep was an effort which his remaining strength was unable to cope with. He struck a match, lit the candle, poured what was left of the rum into his tin mug and gulped the fiery stuff down. It surprised him to feel that he was weeping. . . .

There was a draft along the floor, it was cold inside anyway with the fire in the little stove dead for a long time, but he noticed none of this. His mouth twitched and twisted, weeping he bit his lips and muttered, choking: "My God! My God! His firebird! Varya, Varya, are you crazy? What are you doing, Varya girl!"

Finally he did fall asleep, but he slept for no more than a couple of hours. When he awoke, he glanced with loathing at the German bottle, at the mug from which he had drunk the rum. He shaved, rubbed himself down with snow, sewed a fresh white undercollar on his tunic, and sending for Shapiro and Veresova, started on his morning round.

It was a strange look—long, intent and anxious, as if she wanted to make sure—that Varya gave him when they saw each other that morning. Nora dusted a stool for him with the hem of her coat. Pausing in the low doorway, Veresova said, yawning, that she was going because she had not slept a wink all night. Her voice was venomous, slightly shrill. Behind a rigged-up curtain some of the patients were playing chess, and a voice was singing the *Blue Scarf* with intense feeling. At the far end of the room a sailor, tortured by his sufferings, was cursing monotonously without a pause, and Volodya could hear Dr. Shapiro hushing him gently.

He sat down.

Varya gazed and gazed at him.

And then her eyes brimmed over with tears, and in a low voice she said something Volodya could not catch.

"What did you say?" he asked, bending close over her.

"I found you," she repeated rapidly. "I found you! Can't you understand? I found you."

"He's a bloody liar, that lieutenant-colonel!" Volodya thought, desperately wishing for it to be really so. "He lied. He lied about everything, the matinee idol, the firebird, the skunk!"

He enclosed her wrist in his big, cool hand. And as he took her pulse, he found the impulse to press his lips to this dear, broad palm too strong to resist. He was counting her pulse, but in those seconds he was not a doctor. He could not even think clearly. He was not a man in authority, he was not even a surgeon, what was happening to him just now was the same as on that night long, long ago, when he sat on the deck of the ship taking him to Bogoslovsky in Chorny Yar, and repeated over, and over again: "Ginger, I do love you, I love you, love you." And again, as in those far-off days, he blamed himself and swore he would never let anything so stupid happen again, and he gazed into her wide-open eyes meeting his so gladly, and thought he would never gaze his fill.

"Well?" she asked, understanding his inner world always. "What does my pulse say, dearest?"

He did not know.

And, going red with embarrassment as in his student days, he pressed his lips to her soft palm, believing yet disbelieving, elated yet doubting, hoping yet dreading. . . .

Then he stood up, and with a muttered "I'll be back" shot out of the underground ward into the cold, fumbled for his cigarettes, smoked one, breathed deeply of the frosty air, and went back to the hospital—the dignified doctor, the surgeon, the Chief Medical Officer whose mind was occupied with many important and urgent matters. But of course he could not put it over Varya. . . .

She lay there quiet and wan, and only her eyes laughed: oh, how well she knew him! And how difficult it was for him to go through the motions all over again, pick up her hand, make an aloof face only to lose count, and then determine at last that her pulse was a bit fast, but it was strong and normal on the whole.

"Maybe there's been nothing the matter with me at all?" she whispered as if they were playing a game of conspirators. "Did you two bandage me up for fun?"

Volodya stared at her in silence. What if there had been Kozyrev? What difference did it make? Or did it? Why did she say "you two"?

She was still smiling. He wasn't.

"Volodya!" she called softly, and tugged at the cuff of his coat. "Volodya, dearest, what's the matter?"

"With me? Nothing at all," he said frigidly.

And Varya knew—he wasn't playing any more. This was not the same Volodya who had just kissed her hand. Reality had come into its own again, and that interlude was just a short, sweet dream. Dreams don't last, and this dream was over too. Nor could you ever call it back. Maybe it would be better if this tall, lean person, a total stranger, went away? He was a stranger, with no forgiveness, no understanding. . . .

But even as such she could not let him go.

And she burst into small talk, despising herself, her weakness, her want of will power, talking only so he would not leave her. But he did leave, telling her as a valediction that the patient must not talk—and he called her the patient—and that she must have a complete rest. He was not pretending now, she realised. He was making a clean break as he had done that time he left her to go to Zatirukhi. And now, too, he walked away without a backward glance.

"The second time," she whispered. "The second time. But there will be a third time, darling," she sobbed, letting the tears roll down her face unchecked. "There will be a third time in our lives, I know there will."

But he did not know there would be a third time. He never thought of black cats or any other omens, good or bad, nor of any third times. And besides, he had urgent work to do as usual. He was already scrubbing his hands, and his next patient—a mere boy, a pilot with a throat wound, was being prepared for operation. The ragged wound, the spurting arterial blood, the swift grapple with the Reaper who had again come to collect his toll and had planted himself at the foot of the operating table, and Shapiro's drawn-out sigh of relief—all this pushed the thought of Varya into the background and dulled for a few hours the pain that seemed past bearing. After that, Volodya had other duties to attend to, and late in the evening Kozyrev

came back—a stern and sober lieutenant-colonel, spruce in his belts, his jowls bluish after a fresh shave. He brought something for his “missus” as he called her, and asked permission to see her.

Nora was told to take the parcel to Varya, but Volodya refused to let him in.

The next day Kozyrev came again, and once again he was not admitted.

“Would you like me to report you? To Mordvinov, say?”

“Go ahead.”

“Listen, Major, don’t spoil for a fight. You know what that little woman is to me.” Kozyrev was off again.

“That’s entirely your own affair.”

“What if I get in without your permission?”

Volodya walked away without replying. About two hours later a nurse came and told him that the blustering lieutenant-colonel had sneaked his sergeant in, a pretty fast worker himself, to prepare his “break-through” to Lieutenant Stepanova. The sergeant, duly brought before Volodya, admitted everything.

“All right. Get out of here,” Volodya told him.

“But maybe she’s already dead?” the sergeant asked, his eyes bulging with fright. “I’ll tell you the honest truth, Comrade Major: it’s no concern of ours what goes on between her and the lieutenant-colonel. The people in our unit think a lot of her. They’re worried about her. You’ve no idea what a great person she is!”

Volodya finished his cigarette, smiling wistfully: didn’t he know what a great person Varya was?

He told the nurse on duty to take the sergeant in to see Lieutenant Stepanova, but only for five minutes, no more.

The sergeant squeezed his bulk into the splitting hospital coat, which was the largest they could find, and, making a diligent and frightened face, went down to the wards.

Vera Veresova, giving Volodya the promising, intimate smile she reserved for him, handed him a telephone message from Mordvinov.

“You’ve a *great* big future, Vladimir Afanasyevich,” she said, accenting her long a’s which was a mannerism she affected. “The rest of us are just plodders, and you are wanted everywhere! You’re either operating with Kharlamov himself, or you’re at the hospital for the allies, and now it’s Mordvinov who wants you urgently. I place my bet on you, Volodya pet.”

"How d'you mean?" he asked, puzzled. He was always baffled by her innuendos.

"You're the favourite on whom it's safe to bet. Get it? Or haven't you ever been to the races?"

"I'm afraid not," he said like an old, old man. "I'm afraid I've never been to the races, any races. . . ."

She continued to gaze at him, gently biting her always moist, half-parted lips, as if in anticipation. .

"Are you going?"

"It's an order, not an invitation."

"You mean you wouldn't go if it was an invitation?"

"Most probably not."

But she was still not satisfied. She took a look at her face in his mirror and then made a pretence of tidying his room for him, just a little bit, but it would anyway give it that "woman's touch"—a pet expression of hers.

"What special orders have you for that patient Stepanova?" she asked formally.

"None," he answered almost calmly. "I shall speak to Dr. Shapiro before I go."



Chapter 10

Hey You, Up There!

The air was transparent and cool, with a salty tang, gauzy pink clouds sailed in the sky over the fire-blackened town, and as always in the season of white nights in these latitudes, Ustimenko was confused—was it morning or evening?

Some American sailors—big, strong men with a healthy flush on their faces, were sitting on the granite steps of the bomb-damaged Zapolyarye Hotel or lounging between the pillars. They were drowsily smoking and selling things. Some had nylons looped around their thick necks. One, lankier than the rest, with hair

bleached almost white had tins of sausages and corned beef stacked in a small pyramid beside him; another with a dark pock-marked face was woodenly banging two enormous chocolate bars together. A little apart, a French sailor from the Resistance, a hook-nosed, tattered figure, was sobbing drunkenly and shaking his fists.

Ustimenko edged past the cartons of cigarettes, the nylons, the chewing gum, and the ham sandwiches which the sailors had got at the Intourist restaurant for sixty kopeks apiece, and were now offering at crazy prices. From the doorway he saw a tall, lean woman, probably a stevedore, giving the sailor two red thirty-ruble notes for the ham sandwiches and him adroitly wrapping them up for her in a piece of paper he had on hand for the purpose. The pock-marked one was still knocking his chocolate bars together.

"It's like a bad dream," Volodya thought as he went up the stairs.

But the hawking out in the street was nothing compared with what was going on in Room 29 on the first floor. This was a regular store, with American sailors from the *Paola* doing a brisk trade. Volodya knew one of them, the huge, red-haired chap who had been slightly burnt, and whom Volodya had examined in Ward's hospital. The sailor also recognised his doctor.

"Hi, doc!" he shouted with a big white-toothed smile. "You can have things at a special discount. We've got everything, bacon, chocolate, cigarettes, sulfa drugs, flour all kinds, rice, butter—take your pick!"

There was quite a crowd of customers. Volodya recognised some musical comedy actors and actresses who had arrived a short while ago to put on shows for the Navy. They stood in line, humbly and obediently, ashamed of being seen by officers passing the door.

The *Paola* steward, a round little man with short fat arms, was measuring out glassfuls of wheat flour, sugar, coffee and cream of wheat. A writing desk, covered with a bedsheet, had been placed in front of the door into the passage to serve as a counter; at the far end of the room there were more men busy unpacking bales and cases.

"Come on, doc," the red-haired sailor called out cheerily. "You don't have to queue and we'll let you have things cheap. It's good stuff we've got here!"

This red-haired businessman had already picked up a little Russian, and as Volodya turned to leave he shouted to him: "Hold on, doc! *Mi imeyem prekrasny sulfa!*"

Mordvinov was asleep on the lumpy sofa, his overcoat drawn right over his head, and for a long time he was unable to rouse himself sufficiently to understand what Major Ustimenko was doing in his room. Then he drank some stale yellowish water from the carafe, rolled himself a makhorka cigarette, coughed to clear his throat, and said: "We thought and thought, Afanasy Vladimirovich, and we. . ."

"Vladimir Afanasyevich," Volodya corrected his superior somewhat rudely.

"I'm sorry, Major. Well then, we thought and thought, and finally we arrived at the conclusion that you'll have to go with the convoy. . ."

Mordvinov's handsome face looked sallow, and there were puffy bags, like an old man's, under his hot black eyes. He coughed again, still without clearing his throat completely.

"And what am I to do in the convoy?" Volodya asked.

"You are certainly not going to command a ship, you can take my word for it. We want you to get specific and accurate information on the medical service and its efficiency in the convoys. Their ship's doctors greatly exaggerate some things. And then in some cases they have the same man doing the job of ship's doctor and ship's chaplain. Obviously you couldn't get any objective information from such a person. There is another thing that strikes us as very odd, and we would like to investigate the cause of it calmly and thoroughly: the incongruously, the strangely great number of overcooling and frostbite cases among their sailors, as compared to our ships' crews."

Mordvinov crushed his cigarette in the ashtray and fell silent.

"Is that all?" Volodya asked.

"No, there's something else. . ."

Through the partly opened windows with the plywood panes came the wail of the air raid sirens.

"Your patient, that young English lieutenant, will go with you. Our command has received a verbal request from his mother to send him home on a Russian ship, a Soviet ship. It's a delicate situation, therefore the verbal request to preclude any unpleasantness. But when you come to think of it, the whole thing is very simple: we may be barbarians, Bolsheviks, vandals, heathens, and God knows what else, but this lady knows that

we won't abandon her boy on a sinking ship. We'll either all go down and never get there, or we'll bring her boy to her."

"The boy's chances are very poor," Volodya said gloomily. "I expect you've heard, Kharlamov must have told you..."

"He did, but I fail to see why his chances should be poor, a secondary hemorrhage is not inevitable..."

"That's exactly what the English doctors are counting on. But Kharlamov and Levin are convinced that there will be a secondary hemorrhage, the only question is when. Understand?" Volodya said bluntly.

"Yes," Mordvinov said, becoming irritated. "But actually I have nothing to do with this at all. We have received a request from the Allied command. And we feel we must carry it out."

Getting up to show that the interview was over, he added that Captain Amirajibi, commander of the *Alexander Pushkin*, had been consulted and had agreed to provide the best possible accommodation for the patient.

In the passage outside the room, which Volodya called the "Yankee drugstore", a battle was in full swing. English sailors, resenting the black market, had ripped open a bag of flour and crowned the proprietor of the flourishing firm with a packing case, and now from the darkness of the room where all the lamps had been smashed came savage growls, shouts and cursing. British and American M.P.s were trying to establish law and order, with little effect...

"Selling and buying is all very well, of course," the British M.P. explained to Volodya politely. "But one should realise where, when and what one may sell. Don't you think so?"

More yelling came from the "drugstore". The M.P.s evidently meant business this time.

As Mordvinov and Volodya were leaving the hotel, a dive bomber dropped a shell not far away; the blast wave gave them a slight shove, gently enough for them not to notice or, perhaps, simply not let on to one another that they had felt it. But the ringing in Volodya's ears persisted even after he had stopped to have his boots polished by the famous Caucasian boy who had settled for good in the ruins of the Sailors' Club.

"How much, friend?" Volodya asked him, admiring the beautiful sheen on his old navy boots.

"A hundred," the boy answered laconically, and glanced up at Volodya with his round, dewey and fathomless eyes.

"Are you right in the head?"

"I'm risking my life, working under these conditions," the urchin replied stiffly.

And Volodya had to pay.

Jack, the fat chef, was sitting on the hospital porch. Beside him Petya's old tomcat was diligently washing himself.

"What's new, old chap?" Volodya greeted him.

"Bad news for me, doctor," the chef said glumly. "I'm being transferred to Africa, and I can't take the cat along, can I! Who'll look after him when I'm gone? What will Petya think when he comes back? I promised the laddie, you know."

Two bombs exploded again behind the cliff far away. The cat stopped washing himself and Jack scratched him behind his ear.

"Clever cat. He's sensitive to bombs. Hates them. Would you like something to eat, doc?"

"No thanks," Volodya refused out of sheer pride, for he was very hungry. "Thanks, Jack, but I'm full. Good-bye and good luck."

They shook hands long and heartily. And suddenly Volodya felt fine.

"Oh, it's you, doctor," Lionel said when Volodya came into his room. "Why don't you stay put when they're dropping bombs?"

"I was in a hurry to get to my very rich patient. I have one, you know, he's an earl, a class enemy from England's two hundred peers. I'll present him with an account afterwards, and he'll have to part with a good chunk of his fortune. I'll become a rich man and I'll open a little shop. Getting rich, I understand, is the purpose of life. . . ."

Lionel smiled, but Volodya's teasing had obviously gone home, and his smile was not very gay.

"Why did you stay away so long?"

"The war isn't over yet, Sir Lionel. Your friends Hitler, Göring and Mussolini haven't been strung up yet. There are other wounded men besides you. . . ."

Lionel was looking past Volodya, at the door it seemed.

"I had a bit of a scare when you were not here," he said casually. "Yesterday, I suddenly spat blood. . . ."

"It's come!" Volodya thought. And told himself sternly: "Keep calm."

"It's not improbable," he said, trying to speak naturally. "After all, you do have a bullet in your lung, and quite a large one. . . . It may cause a rather bad hemorrhage but don't let it frighten you. . . ."

"I don't have to be comforted," Lionel said in a level voice. "That ass Ward was more frightened than I was yesterday, but still, no matter what you may say, I do feel worse than I did before. . . ."

Volodya studied the temperature chart in silence.

"All clear! All clear!" the announcer's voice came over the loudspeaker, but immediately the air raid warning was given again.

"What a frightful bore!" Lionel said plaintively. "Everyone stays in the shelter all day. While there was rain and fog they made a lot of noise here, it wasn't nice but at any rate it was less lonely. And now they've made a home of the air raid shelter, they've struck root there, playing cards and dice, drinking whisky and enjoying life generally. Move me next door with your chaps, they're flyers, I know. One of them has been to see me and we had a chat deaf-and-dumb fashion, all the flyers in the world can tell each other how they got hit or how they hit by gesticulating with their hands. . . ."

Volodya did not speak.

"Well, doc?"

"Can't be done."

"But why on earth not?"

"Because your Churchill will start complaining to our high command again that we're not looking after you properly!"

"That's not true. You're simply afraid that I'll see how inferior the menu of your pilots is to that of all those rotters. And you're also afraid that I'll see those hideous robes they wear instead of pyjamas. And their rotten mattresses. Don't worry, doctor, I know all about it anyway. And about being poor, too. You see, my brothers and I used to play at hungry paupers when we were small, and it was jolly good fun!"

"We're not playing games here," Volodya said coldly.

"Did you mean what you said about Churchill or were you pulling my leg?"

"I meant it quite seriously."

"I'll tell my mother everything and she'll tell his wife," Lionel promised confidently. "And don't smile, they often see each other. . . ."

Volodya could not help smiling: it was such a laughable notion that this boy's mother would say something to someone and then Winston Churchill would put his foot down, get the

convoys to be sent one after the other, and give orders to open up the Second Front. . . .

"I wish you'd pour us both a drink," Lionel said. "After all, we are going on a journey together, from what I gather. And let's drink to us not running aground."

"How do you know we're going on a journey together?"

"It'll do you good to see the world," Lionel said. "You'll enjoy the sea breezes too. However, if you'd rather not go, I'll help you not to get sent. Those Arctic convoys are, indeed, an unnerving experience. . . ."

Volodya opened his mouth to swear, but that was as far as he got because there were two explosions quite near, much closer than the harbour. The hospital shook twice, and Lionel said:

"The ground's a rather sick-making place when they start hurling bombs like this, the Boschcs, I mean. Strange as it may sound, I've never or almost never been helpless in bed like this during an air raid. It's more fun when you're up in the air."

"What a queer way you have of talking," Volodya said. "Everything is either fun or no fun. You might really be taking it as a sort of game. . . ."

He left the hospital before the "All Clear" was sounded. Below, a stinking, acrid smoke rose from the fish cannery, fighter planes were darting in and out of the clouds seeking out the Germans hiding there, and some stern-faced women stevedores were shouting like men:

"Heave 'er up!"

"Easy now!"

"Stop, blast you!"

A crowd of bored American sailors watched the muffled-up women from the top of the ramp of a huge, camouflaged Liberty ship. One of them was catching sunbeams in a small mirror and playing them in the women's eyes, another, cupping his hands round his mouth, was shouting sassy things to them. And the cook, with his starched cap perched at the back of his head, kept yelling: "Hi, Mamselle, hello Russki!"

"Where is the *Pushkin* berthed, d'you know?" Volodya asked a stocky woman with sharply jutting cheekbones, her head bound in a flowered shawl that came right down to her eyebrows.

"Look at that! He's one of our own fellows! A sailor boy!" the woman said gladly.

"Sure, I'm your fellow," Volodya said with an attempt at levity.

"Tall, dark and handsome, too!"

The stocky woman flashed a jolly look at his face, laughed and called out in a singsong voice: "Hey girls! We've got a boy friend! He's feeling sorry for us grass widows. Can you manage, sailor boy? Look how many we are, and every one of us a beauty!"

Blushing a bright red in that stupid, everlasting way of his, Volodya mumbled something to the effect that he was in no mood for joking, but the women, suddenly keen on the lark, advanced on him in a body, yelling that they'd stand him three square meals a day, that they'd kiss him senseless, and that he'd better be a real patriot or else they'd tickle him to death right there and then and throw him into the sea for the cods to eat. . . .

Giggling, Volodya backed away, caught his foot in something and rolled on the ground, and even before instinct told him to keep his head low—the thing happened. He came to, deafened and dazed, after some time. He tried to get up, but couldn't. With a surgeon's hands, not his own, he felt himself all over to see if he was all in one piece. He was, he believed. He saw the sky above him, but he could not tell if they were midday, morning or evening clouds. He saw the side of the Liberty ship—enormous and grey, rearing to the sky. And again the sky with its fast-moving clouds, the pale-blue sky of the North.

And only then he saw them. They were dead. Who, they? There wasn't anybody at all. There was a face. An arm. An end of a white loaf in a handkerchief, someone's lunch. There was part of a leg—white and unattached. And something else in a padded jacket—a bleeding mass, unbearable. . . .

Even he could not stand the sight. He made about twenty lurching steps away from this grave, and threw up. Again and again. And then, when his strength ebbed again and he lay back against some sleepers, he heard moaning.

The woman had been thrown by the blast, and she lay dying, there beside the crane. He tried to do something for her with his dirty, sticky, unobeying hands. And then it occurred to him that the Liberty ship was there, a huge ship which had everything: doctors, sick bay, instruments, stretchers. . . .

Swaying and stumbling he started down the wharf along the ship's side. But the ramp wasn't there. Had he gone mad? From the top of that ramp one sailor had been catching the sun in a mirror, and the cook in his starched cap had been yelling: "Hi,

Mamselle, hello, Russki!" The ramp—a big, solid ramp, had been suspended from there right down to the wharf.

"Hey you, up there!" he shouted.

It occurred to him then that they could not hear him from up there, and remembering the pistol he carried he fired a shot. When he had fired the whole clip, he listened, but there was no sound, no answer at all.

He craned his neck and saw nothing.

Nothing but the huge, grey side of the ship rearing skywards.

They had raised the ramp, that's all, to save themselves trouble, so no one should bother them, and the bomb which had been aimed at them but had instead hit the Russian women should not interfere with their customary routine.

Breathing heavily, his throat raw, the pistol clutched in his hand, he returned to the last of the women, the dying one. She was already dead, and no American sick bays could help her now.

And above the harbour wailed the sirens of the alarm again, announcing the beginning of the next air raid.

Hunching his shoulders and dragging his feet, he made his slow way in search of the *Pushkin*.

And suddenly he saw himself as such a tiny, insignificant, stupid thing—a fool with a notion that all men were brothers. They raised the ramp, those brothers, that's what they did!

A Bleeding Heart

"My dear doctor!" Captain Amirajibi greeted Volodya when he walked into his saloon. "My rescuer!"

Then he took a closer look at him and said anxiously: "You look pretty rotten. A hot bath, perhaps?"

Volodya nodded.

Amirajibi was sitting at a small writing desk, playing a game of solitaire. He slapped the cards down as viciously as if he were trouncing his opponent's ace. In the bathroom beyond, water was gurgling merrily into the white tub, and a scent of the pine bath salts Auntie Polya, the stewardess, had thrown in, was rising from it.

"Did you get caught in the air raid?" Amirajibi asked.

"A little," Volodya replied, but he could not hear his own voice.

"You'll take a bath and then we'll have some brandy, I've got one more bottle."

"All right."

"And we'll eat! I haven't had dinner yet."

"What's the time?" Volodya asked. "My watch has stopped. . . ." And, as if to prove it, he held out his hand, which was covered with blood.

"Oh, I say, the brandy had better come now," Amirajibi said. "Petrokovsky won't object, he's a hospitable person."

Amirajibi continued to stare at Volodya's hand.

"It's not my blood. I wasn't wounded," Volodya said, stumbling over the words.

He could not remember why he came to the *Pushkin*. He must have had a reason for coming here when he set off. It was something he wanted to ask Amirajibi, of course, but what?

Was it about his patient?

Or had Mordvinov asked him that morning to take a message to Amirajibi?

If so, what?

Amirajibi continued talking in his mild jocular way a little longer.

Neither of them smiled. The brandy did not help Volodya. Only the hot bath offered some relief. He even dozed a bit, but in his half-sleep he heard the singsong voice of the dead woman again: "Look how many we are, and every one of us a beau-ty!"

"And get a shirt and clean underwear for the doctor," Volodya heard his host telling someone. "Get it from the Chief Officer, they're the same size."

"Everything's common property on this ship," Volodya thought with vague approval. "I heard them bragging once that they only kept their ammunition guarded."

Amirajibi brought him a change of underwear, house shoes and a robe made of some beautiful, curly stuff. The elderly stewardess they all called Auntie Polya served the meal in the Captain's stateroom, and Volodya ate a whole plate of spaghetti. Petrokovsky came in, glanced commiseratingly at Volodya and asked: "How's your Englishman, doctor?"

"Why, do you know him?"

"I like that, I really like that!" the Chief Officer exclaimed. "Who d'you think pulled him out of the water when he had all but kicked off?"

"Don't brag, don't brag, my dear friend," Amirajibi told him without looking up from the sheaf of papers he was signing.

"I'm not bragging, I'm simply fed up that all the rescued turn out to be their chaps. They're good at catapulting into the sky, but when it comes to stopping their engines to pick up a drowning boy, and what a boy, they won't do it."

Going purple with rage, Petrokovsky added uncontrollably: "The whores." Amirajibi actually swayed in his chair.

"You slay me!" he cried with mock horror. "Couldn't you have chosen an adequate but decent description? For instance a Bacchant. Or a hetaira. Or even a tart, if you must! If you want to express your disapproval of those 'lambs in the grass' say: they are harlots. But what do you do? You curse like a bad, a thoroughly bad street urchin, and here on my ship, in wartime! What will the doctor think of us? We must be always modest, extremely sober and impeccably clean morally. That's the kind of people we must be, dear Petrokovsky! Do you understand?"

"I guess so," the Chief Officer said with a sigh, and left them.

Amirajibi, standing in front of the highly polished porthole began to sing under his breath:

*Please put in a kind word
For this old hussar,
Your husband will not let us in. . . .*

Swerving round sharply to face Volodya, he asked: "Are you coming on this trip with us?"

"I believe I am."

"If my information is correct, you've been appointed to our ship, is that right?"

"Yes, it's something like that. . . ."

And still he was unable to remember what brought him there. He must be looking pretty wild-eyed, because Amirajibi watched him so intently all the time.

"Do things look bad for him, for the boy?"

"What makes you think that?"

"The call I received from the British officials. They were very civil. Perhaps even a bit too civil. I've had enough dealings with them, I know those military, or rather naval, officials well."

"Things are not too good," Volodya said. "They wouldn't agree to an operation."

"Will you manage to do it all by yourself on the ship?"

"It's out of the question."

"Pity," Amirajibi said pensively and gently. "He's a bit cheeky, that boy, he's a bit like those precocious pups who early develop a loud bark, but then he's not afraid to bark at the big, frightening dogs. He fought bravely and ably that rotten day, we all watched the battle. He picked and got a fight, if you know what I mean, he wanted to help us with all his young might. Ah, if they had people like him in their Admiralty!"

"You're right," Volodya said, suddenly feeling grateful to Amirajibi for understanding Lionel. "It's very, very true..."

"He was a bit cocky when they wounded him—your boy. You know how those youngsters speak sometimes: 'I'm not wounded, I'm killed, Your Excellency!' It's beautiful, really, and a great pity about the boy. Let's have a drink, doctor."

Auntie Polya brought in two huge cups of black, fragrant coffee—they made excellent coffee on the *Pushkin*, and Amirajibi produced a couple of cigars.

"I've no more," he said. "There's no more of any damn thing. Whenever anyone wants anything, the *Pushkin* Master has to provide, but on the return trip we've nothing, not even the lousiest makhorka. Yesterday, a crazy sort of subscription was raised on our ship and we donated our entire supply of sugar towards something or other. It's a band of anarchists and not a Soviet ship I say..."

"You were the first to sign," Auntie Polya spoke from behind Amirajibi's back. "Why blame it on others..."

"I mustn't be given such papers to sign," Amirajibi told her. "I'm a weak man. I must be safeguarded against such papers, Auntie Polya, I must be kept on a chain..."

Auntie Polya cleaned and pressed Volodya's coat and trousers for him, and he could go now, but he did not feel like going. They went with Amirajibi and looked over the small and immaculately clean sick bay, wondering how best to carry Lionel up to the deck and back in case of need, and then, when they had been sitting in deck chairs in the breeze for some time, Volodya suddenly found himself telling Amirajibi how unbearable it was for a doctor sometimes to reconcile himself to losing a patient. The man—wounded or ill, it made no difference, would die, and the doctor blamed himself. And maybe there was good sense in the paper a certain scientist had published telling doctors not to grow attached to their patients but to keep them at arm's length.

Amirajibi listened, and then began talking with disapproval in his voice.

Seagulls fell sideways into the water with piercing cries; and Amirajibi spoke slowly, reflectively.

"Oh, what nonsense! Anything might be published, paper can support anything, and will go on doing so for a long time to come. Take *Mein Kampf*, all those racists, anti-Semites, and others who wrote anything they pleased—paper stood it. That scientist, you see, is a famous specialist, and being an authority he asserts that a surgeon should not become personally involved with the person he's going to operate on, because if the outcome is fatal the surgeon suffers a moral trauma. Right? Is this what you meant?"

"Yes," Volodya nodded.

"How disgusting!" Amirajibi shrugged his shoulders squeamishly. "Getting personally involved means getting your feelings involved. And one's feelings get involved only if there's mutual attraction, if two people like each other, and it makes no difference at all who they are—a doctor and his patient, two sailors, or a pilot and a sailor. Becoming thus personally involved with someone new is always good for a man, it enriches him, and only a mean and utter fool would deny himself this. And if we develop this idea to the absurd, we'll see that we must not have any friends at all, because in this bad world someone will always be dying. And losing your friends is a trauma."

He placed his hand on Volodya's shoulder, and after a thoughtful silence said: "Don't stuff your head with any silly rubbish, my young friend! Never grudge anyone your love. Forgive me this grandiloquence, but a bleeding heart does much more good to others than the postcard variety with cooing doves around it, the kind they used to put out in the old days. Old Gorky had some beautiful words to say on this subject, and I confess I'm partial to beautiful writing. . . ."

He slapped his pockets and asked: "Have you any makhorka?"

"Here you are."

"Air raid alarm again, Captain," said the Chief Officer, coming towards them.

"Are you waiting for my instructions, George?" Amirajibi asked, surprised. "But you know what they are, always: fire, but fire well. Ah, George, how absent-minded you are!"

The alarm was set off in the harbour—a formation of Junkers was coming on.

"D'you like war, doctor?" Amirajibi asked, fumbling with paper and loose tobacco.

"No!" Volodya replied, mystified by the question.

Amirajibi glanced at him quickly and smiled his melancholy smile.

"What an amazing coincidence!" he said, shouting now to make himself heard above the noise of the ship's heavy machine-guns. "I don't either. . . ."

It was only in that moment that Volodya remembered why he wanted to see Amirajibi: it was to ascertain, if only approximately, how much time he had before the convoy's sailing date. There was Varya in the hospital. He had to make arrangements and somehow get her evacuated to a hospital in the rear.

"We'll talk after the All Clear," Amirajibi shouted in his car. "Can't hear a damn thing just now!"

It's More Than Flesh Can Stand

Yelena was skipping with a skipping rope! It was such an extraordinary sight that Volodya stopped short. Only that winter it seemed the child would never smile. And here she was, skipping with carefree abandon, restored to her natural state of childhood and, obviously enjoying it thoroughly.

"Hello there, Yelena!" he called out.

She gave a funny squeal.

"Comrade Major! I didn't see you come in, silly me!"

She beamed, looking straight into his eyes, raising and dropping her enormous eyelashes that seemed to have grown even longer since he last saw her.

"How's life? All right?" he asked her, awkwardly placing his hand on her sturdy little shoulder.

"All right," she said, loving his rare caress and snuggling into his hand. "We're putting on a new show tonight, will you come?"

"Most certainly I will."

"Everything's fine then. But you will come, promise?"

"Promise."

"I'm going to sing the *Blue Scarf*, it's a pretty song, have you heard it?"

"No, I don't believe I have."

Actually, he was no longer aware of her questions and his answers. All he could think about at the moment, all he could see was Kozyrev driving up in his Willis and stopping in front of the hospital. There was no one else in the car. He got out,

glanced about him casually, thought a moment, filled his pipe and having got it going, waved to someone with the geniality of a movie star.

"It's Vera Nikolayevna he's saying hello to," Yelena explained helpfully. "See her now?"

And Volodya thought grimly: "God, even this infant seems to know all about my private affairs, she's doing what she can to help. To help me not to look ridiculous. She's heard them talking in the hospital and has put two and two together. I do look ridiculous, of course, terribly funny, in fact. But what difference does it make—funny or not funny. It's all finished, done with forever, gone to hell, finished!"

Captain Shapiro came up and reported hastily that all was well, nothing untoward had happened in his absence, after which he lapsed into a somewhat embarrassed silence and even turned slightly pink. Did they all feel embarrassed for him, or what?

Lieutenant-Colonel Kozyrev slowly emerged from behind the cliff, walking with a leisurely rolling gait, looking as if he owned the place, and dispensing smiles right and left. He now had a white hospital robe on and was making for the surgical ward to see Varya.

"There's nothing I could do about it," Vera Vercsova said to Volodya with a sigh of resignation. "He got permission from Mordvinov himself. And Mordvinov, as you well know, is not too fond of you and me. You should have heard him on the phone, he was really fierce. Have you seen him?"

"Mordvinov? Yes, I've seen him."

"He didn't say anything to you?"

"No."

"That's because I took all the blame," Vera said complacently. "I told him it was I who wouldn't let him in. He believed me. . . ." And, laughing gaily, added: "Aren't you men easy to deceive. . . ."

A wind was tearing in gusts from the bay, whipping at the laundry hung on lines, and bringing with it a fine but vicious sea spray.

"I'm sure you've had nothing to eat all day!" Vera suddenly exclaimed. "Have you? You haven't? Go to your room, I'll fix you up an excellent meal in a minute. There's some delicious pilau. Well, go on, you impossible person! Yelena child, take Major away, and lay the table in his room. You know how to do everything now, there's a good girl."

"Never mind, I'll do it myself," Volodya said sourly, and went to his room, sickened in advance by the lengthy and useless condolences Vera was sure to smother him in.

But she was even smarter than he thought her.

Her attitude was anything but "pitying"; on the contrary, it was the easy and natural behaviour of a good friend who was not going to pry. Pouring him a glass of vodka, and garnishing the pilau with plenty of pepper (she hated flat-tasting food) she told him an amusing story—made the spicier for her ability to see the funny and the base in people—about a certain general from the main naval base, a man of substance with no nonsense about him, who fell in love with her and showered her with little gifts. This went on until his wife, a hard, hysterical and extremely brave lady, suddenly descended on him, having got wind of the affair, and put an instant, abrupt stop to the whole thing. In order to get the details straight, the good lady came to see Vera at the hospital and invited all the big noises for the hearing.

Vera, who was as cruelly observant as women of her type are apt to be, was equally unsparing towards herself, and she told the story with such verve and humour that Volodya forgot to brood and simply listened and smiled. . . .

"This just shows you that we've all had our lieutenant-colonels," she concluded in a sophisticated drawl. "And what do all of them matter compared with love, if there is such a thing?"

"What are you driving at?" he asked disagreeably.

"Your private life," she said, placing one knee on a stool and leaning close to him. "Didn't I make that clear?"

He remained sulkily silent, absently scraping up the last of the pilau from the frying pan. What did she want of him? Why did she have to bring Varya up? And he had thought she would be tactful enough to leave that subject alone.

"It's none of my business?" she asked softly. "Is this what you're thinking?"

"More or less," he answered, meeting her shining eyes for a brief moment.

"Oh no, it *is* my business!" she said sharply. "It is my business because I love you. I love you knowing that you don't care for me and never have cared. It is my business because there's nothing I wouldn't do for you. I love you, you self-centred beast, I love you, I believe in you infinitely, I want to be with you always, I want to look up to you, I want to bless fate for finally surrendering you to me. You still don't understand?"

"You're mistaken, Vera Nikolayevna," he said, aloofly polite. "You have made me up, Vera Nikolayevna. You've also made up that thing about a pony you're putting your bet on. It's a lot of nonsense, tripe, because I'm just a rather boring doctor, that's all. And that's all I'll ever be. . . ."

"Just listen to him!" she said with a light laugh. "What courage! He has even crossed himself off, only so I should get out of his way. Oh well, forget it. That girl of yours is really a very sweet creature. I would have fallen in love with her too, if I were a man, and I quite understand how you and the glamorous Kozyrev feel about her. I've found something out from his men, and take this as a gift from me: the lieutenant-colonel is married, his wife writes him regularly and sends him snapshots of their offspring. He writes to her as regularly and sends parcels home. Therefore, the future belongs to you. Birds like Kozyrev—and I know what I'm talking about because you've just heard the parable about my general—are so bold and dashing only in the absence of their lawful wives. In peacetime, they're as meek as lambs. Kozyrev, undoubtedly, calls his wife Mother, and she calls him Daddy, theirs is a healthy, model family, so how could he possibly break it up? No, my dear Major, have no fear, you'll get your Varya in the end, there's no doubt about it, only you'll have to wait a bit, my dear Vladimir Afanasyevich, wait till your time comes and resign yourself to the inevitable present. . . ."

"Look here," he almost shouted, losing control. "I refuse. . . ."

"Order me to stand at attention, why don't you?" she responded quickly with a throaty chuckle. "Or have me locked up in the brig for five days! There'd be nothing wrong in that, Comrade Major, I'm subordinate to you and you have every right to call me to order. . . ."

The trembling of her fingers as she rolled herself a cigarette belied her bantering tone, and Volodya wondered in some irritation if the woman really did love him, perhaps.

However, it did not matter to him either way just then.

All that mattered was whether Kozyrev had left Varya or was still there. He had to find out. But before he could do anything about it, Kozyrev himself walked in.

"My respects to science," he said, sitting down. "I understand you'll be discharging my patient soon?"

"Not exactly, Comrade Lieutenant-Colonel," Vera replied dryly. "We're evacuating her to a hospital in the rear. She still has a long course of treatment ahead of her."

"Oh well, no one's debarred from coming to my unit from there!"

Vera smiled: "She is."

"What do you mean? Would you explain, please?"

"There's nothing to explain. She's through with active service."

"You don't say?" Kozyrev said with good-natured insolence. "Do you decide these things yourselves without any outside help?"

"I take exception to your tone, Lieutenant-Colonel," Volodya spoke brusquely. "We are doing what we consider necessary, and you are free to complain to any of your numerous friends at court. And please leave us now. . . ."

But those were not the words to use—they left Kozyrev completely unimpressed. It was Vera's unexpected thrust that pierced his armour. He even stopped answering back when she spoke, and turned a sickly yellow.

"It's no concern of mine," she said gently, and touched Kozyrev's arm with her fingertips. "But I would sincerely advise you to call a halt to the fuss you've started. The command has intimated to me that granting you permission to visit Stepanova here is the last such request they can see their way to satisfying. This affair has caused a lot of talk, too much. . . ."

Kozyrev took a deep breath, and then asked quickly: "Am I in for a dressing down?"

"I don't know," Vera said reluctantly. "You will be, if any signals have come in. . . ."

"I expect they have, even a siskin can't get by without another dickey bird telling on him," Kozyrev said resentfully. "Oh well, thanks for the sympathy. . . ."

"But I wasn't offering you any sympathy. I only warned you because I naturally want to keep our hospital free from any censure we haven't deservedly invoked."

"Cautious, aren't you?"

"Supposing I am? It's your mess, so it's up to you to straighten it. . . ."

"You may be sure I won't come crying to you for help. . . ."

He got his pipe going and then stalked out as if he had indeed carried the day.

Vera said softly and confidently to Volodya: "You'll never go wrong if you stick to me, see?"

"Yes I will!" Volodya objected rudely and vehemently. "I will go wrong, that's the whole trouble. I'll become as low as the lowest rotter!"

"Oh, what a lovely little speech!" Vera laughed. "I've read this somewhere, you know, or perhaps it was a movie—the woman made a rotter of the man, the dear little angel. Only it won't wash. If a man is essentially good, you can't turn him into a rotter. If he's a bit rotten inside and has merely kept it from showing, then there's little harm done. But just now, with Kozыrev, you didn't stop me although you knew I was lying. Why didn't you? Because you were anxious to get rid of the strutting peacock. Aren't I right?"

"You're making it all up," he said lamely. "About your feelings, too. There's never been anything, there isn't now and never will be."

"My feelings!" she said with her throaty chuckle. "Just what do you mean by that, I wonder?"

Volodya looked at her from under his eyebrows, and begged: "Please leave me alone, Vera Nikolayevna, can't you? You live your life, and I'll live mine. We're different people, you and I, it's difficult for us to understand one another. . . ."

"Showing me the door?"

He did not answer, nor did he look up when the door banged shut after her. He sighed, drank some cold water, and went to see Varya.

"Have you come to me as a doctor, or as a human being for a change?" Varya asked him when he sat down.

"With me these two concepts are combined," he said rather inanely and it was not lost on her, of course. She always noticed such things.

"You mean you're a humanist-doctor who loves his fellow men? Being a light to others, to the best of your ability, you burn yourself out?" She was in a temper, and her lips quivered.

"We're beginning the show!" little Yelena announced loudly, standing at the far end of the ward. "The first part is called a circus of political satire."

There was a burst of applause from the patients. An accordion began to play softly, and Volodya raised the bedsheet that was screening the show from Varya. Both of them looked and saw Yelena dressed in a long white cotton shirt, belted with a length of bandage, with a huge bow in her hair and something like a circus whip in her right hand. In her left she held a leash.

"She's got our dog on that leash," Volodya told Varya because he knew she could not see it from where she lay. "Now, Bob is going to bark, and it will mean Hitler when he first attacked

the Soviet Union. And then he'll turn over on his back, and that will be Stalingrad. Our Yelena is invariably a roaring success. . . ."

"Oh, heavens above! What do I care about it just now!" Varya said in a low voice. "You'll leave me again and vanish for days, and I'll be lying here and thinking. . . ."

He quickly looked into her eyes, and seeing the tears in them said gently: "Don't, Varya. Worrying is bad for you. . . ."

"A complete rest has been ordered?"

"Yes, it has."

The patients clapped and shouted "bravo," and then the accordion began to play again, and Yelena danced the Waltz of the Snowflakes.

"A complete rest has been ordered because I almost died, is that it?"

"Yes, your chances were not too good."

"And you saved my life?"

"That's the popular expression. Another favourite is: 'he will live!' he or she, as the case may be. And one more is: 'the surgeon's wise, kind hands'."

"Why are you so cross?" Varya asked him tenderly.

"Because I'm sick of cheapness!" Volodya felt his voice growing shrill. "You can't imagine how sick and tired I am of everything! I'm nauseated by surgeons sweetly playing violins, surgeons striking mighty chords on the piano, it's as sick-making as calling someone firebird. . . ."

He ought not to have said it, it was cruel and mean, but the words had simply slipped out. For a moment Varya shut her eyes, as though expecting worse to come, that he might hit her. But that would not have been the worst, though. It would have been the kindest thing, perhaps. Oh, why didn't he kill her and be done with it!

He retained a stony silence.

There, at the far end of the ward, Yelena was on to her next number—the hit of the show, the song *Blue Scarf*. The patients listened with bated breath, never stirring, loving Yelena's sweet voice, the tune, and the simple, touching words:

*Slipping from your drooping shoulders
Fluttered a pretty blue scarf. . . .
We said good-bye, but our love won't grow colder
Even though we're far apart. . . .*

*You and I
Walked in the lovely white night,
Always remember
Our words so tender,
Cherish them, dear, in your heart. . . .*

"Nothing extraordinary happened," Volodya said when he could make his voice sound almost calm. "I operated on you, that's all."

"You simply did your duty?" Varya asked, her eyes sombre. "You only did what anyone in your place would have done? Doesn't this remind you of a surgeon striking mighty chords on the piano? The modesty!"

No, she was in no mind to let the firebird go unnoticed. Damn the firebird, she wanted to talk everything over immediately, and get things cleared up once and for all.

But he could not, he had no right.

"I've brought you your shell fragments," he said, forcing a smile. "Keep them to show to your friends after the war. . . . Here. . . ."

She held out her cupped hands, and he dropped the pieces into them, there were seven in all.

Yelena was singing an encore:

*And in my dreams
That brighten the darkest of skies,
I see you, dearest,
Wearing the blue scarf
Matching the blue of your eyes. . . .*

"You mean you dug all this out of my skull?" Varya asked in almost a whisper.

"Sure."

"Is my skull as nasty as that skeleton's which they wouldn't sell us for cash?"

"Remember the thing you wrote in their book of complaints that time: 'Refusal to sell a skeleton for cash may be called stupid bungling or something *worst*,'" Volodya smiled. "And you insisted that I should let you carry the business through to its logical conclusion!"

"You remember everything so well?"

"I've an excellent memory."

"Yes, but you remember it word for word!"

There was clapping again, and they heard Yelena announcing: "Comrades wounded and ill, the show is over."

"You asked me if your skull was nasty. No, it isn't nasty," Volodya said without looking at Varya.

"Is it yellow like a muskmelon?"

"No, white. . . ."

With a smile trembling on her lips she engaged him in this game—only so he wouldn't go away. Anything to make him stay there beside her.

"It wasn't indecent, was it, your poking about in my brain?"

"No, it wasn't indecent. At any rate, I tried to do as little poking as possible."

"But still you did rummage a bit with your big hands?"

Varya alone in all the world could talk like this.

"Why don't you say something?" she demanded suddenly.

"We can't talk nonsense any more. I must answer all your questions. I must answer for everything. . . ."

"You mustn't! Not now!" he broke in quickly. "You're ill, you're not up to it. You'll get excited and cry and. . . ."

"And did you think I was made of stone?" she exclaimed in a voice grown suddenly hoarse. "Do you think it doesn't hurt? How dare you not ask me about anything? You just went and jumped off the tram that day, you just went and left me for good, just went and crossed me out of your life, didn't you? But I. . . but I. . . but it's torture. . . . Don't you dare leave me now, just sit and listen, I've got to tell you everything this minute!"

But he could not listen, he had no right to listen. He was a doctor, after all. And in a steely, imperious voice, not loud, but loud enough for her to understand that otherwise he'd go away at once, he ordered her to be silent.

"You must not talk, Varya," he then said, bending close to her bandaged head. "You mustn't get excited, it's absolutely forbidden. Later, when you are well enough, we'll talk about it. But not now. It's a crime to let you talk as much as I've been letting you already. . . ."

"Will I die from talking?" she asked pertly, and a glitter came into her eyes. "Will I? And now say: idiot! Remember how you used to say it when I couldn't get what your great Sechenov wanted from all of us?"

"Idiot!" he said in a happy whisper.

"And what else did you call me?"

"Will you shut up?"

"Oh, it's more than flesh can stand!" she said, turning pale. "It is, Volodya! Don't go."

She did not speak for a minute. And he sat there, bending close to her, waiting. He no longer dared to silence her.

"It's criminal to let this thing happen," she whispered rapidly and distinctly. "I don't care about anything—not your stuffiness nor that . . . that firebird thing. You and I are alone in the whole world, just the two of us together! I don't understand, I don't care, I no longer want to think. Whatever has been, has been—but that's a small matter. What is awful is that we are losing each other, and it's irretrievable, Volodya. Please try to understand, please! I know, and you know it too, that we're sentencing ourselves to life without marriage, because no matter what happens we'll always be lonely, terribly lonely, all *that* is impossible without love, it doesn't count! But the years, Volodya dear, the years will slip past, and life will be stupid and crazy, as it has been, as it is now, a half-life, a quarter-life, not real life. You don't understand, you don't understand a thing, you still haven't learnt to understand, you aren't really grown-up yet. Think, remember, picture it, my darling silly, how easily you could have taken me along with you on that appointment of yours abroad. You could, you know, Couldn't you?"

He got up.

"Are you going?" she whispered.

"Yes. I'll come again tomorrow. You mustn't talk any more today."

"Please wipe my nose for me," she asked him. "I'm all wet with tears. The hanky's there, on the bedside table. . . ."

He wiped her nose and, hunching his shoulders, went away. And Varya thought: "No, this is not the third time, the third time will be quite separate, not tomorrow, not here, many, many years from now, when we have both grown old. But I'm not sure. There may never be any third time at all. . . ."

And she composed herself to wait for the morrow.

But that morrow never came, because in the middle of the night Volodya received an urgent telephone call to go to the main base. Dr. Veresova informed Lieutenant Stepanova of this in the morning.

"It will only be a day or two before we fly you to a hospital in the rear," she had added cheerfully. "Lieutenant-Colonel Kozyrev has been told, and I'm sure he'll be here to see you off."

Varya made no reply at all.

The Dance of the Cygnets

Dr. Ward brought Lionel in an ambulance and had him carried on board under his personal supervision. "He's efficiency itself in these matters," Volodya thought, watching him. "But only in such matters." He also brought Lionel's case history in a large envelope secured with five seals.

"This won't do, Dr. Ward," Volodya said to him when they were alone in the saloon. "I've got to know what's in there. We know each other a little by now, don't we? After all, you must be answerable for your own cowardice, forgive me for putting it so bluntly. It's not the fault of our medical service. I want, and so does my chief, Professor General Kharlamov, to have our point of view set out in the patient's history, our affirmation of the need for surgical intervention. It is highly probable that the documents in this sealed envelope do not mention this, otherwise you would open it here and now."

But of course Dr. Ward did not open the envelope.

He fell back on the Englishman's traditional shield of reserve. It was not silence, it was a tight-lipped reserve, and then, vouchsafing a remark to the effect that Dr. Ustimenko was very, very particular, departed with a promise to send a "different" case history.

"I did see through you, didn't I?" Volodya observed with an angry chuckle.

"Why pick on words? I meant *another* one, and in an open envelope."

"But can't this envelope be opened? Case histories are not like top-secret diplomatic mail. And, by the way, don't forget to mention the two hemorrhages he had, will you."

They were already going down the gangplank by now. Dr. Ward shrugged and drove away, and Volodya went to see his young peer.

"You may call me Lionel, doctor," he said.

"Sir Lionel?"

"No, just Lionel. You're a very, very old uncle compared to me. And please let me stay up here while the weather holds. I feel fine up here, and I can see everything."

"You're not finding it too windy?"

"No, not at all."

The stretcher had been placed outside the sick bay, out of the wind, but still it was chilly there. Auntie Polya said she

had a fine woolen shawl, and went and fetched it. They wrapped it round Lionel's head and neck according to all the complicated rules, making a quick and excellent job of it. When Auntie Polya had arranged his longish flaxen curls on his unburnt forehead and cheeks, he asked: "I'm like a Russian matryoshka doll now, aren't I?"

Volodya was unable to bring himself to smile as he looked at Lionel. He was like a fiercely proud girl desperately trying to behave like a boy, this Royal Air Force pilot, a composer whose name no one would ever hear now.

"And now I'll drink my milk," said Lionel.

"There's a good boy, Lyonya child," Auntie Polya clucked. "There, Lyonya, there's a good boy."

From that moment on everyone on board the *Pushkin* called him Lyonya, in the Russian way. His air battle over the convoy had earned him universal respect. He knew it and smiled. He liked everything here too—the elegant Chief Officer Petrokovsky, the cabbage salad made for him by the cook, the famous Russian cranberry which he gladly pecked at all the time, Captain Amirajibi's visits when he came to see if his passenger was comfortable and chatted with him about the weather, the cries of the seagulls in the bay, the cool, unobtrusive efficiency of the crew, and even the muzzles of Oerlikons which an elderly and dignified sailor tended with such loving care. . . .

That evening, as Volodya settled down in the saloon to write a letter to Varya, a sailor came and told him that Dr. Ward wanted to speak to him.

He was pacing the deck, his hands thrust in the pockets of his frog-green trenchcoat; below, on the wharf, a British jeep was waiting for him with the motor running.

"Here you are," he said, giving Volodya an open envelope.

The newly compiled case history of Sir Lionel Neville, Lieutenant of the Royal Air Force, was couched in rather vague terms, but at least the facts were there.

"It will do," Volodya said. "Everything's more or less in order."

Folding the papers, he pushed the envelope into his pocket.

"It seems you are to be free of me, at last."

Ward smiled.

"I'd like to say good-bye to Sir Lionel, if I may."

"Come along."

Lionel was not asleep. He lay smoking and sipping a glass of whisky. He was a little drunk, and welcomed Dr. Ward with a strangely glad smile. His expression was enigmatic but there was malice in it.

"Oh, it's you, doctor!" he said, squinting up at Ward. "Imagine, I was already beginning to fear that I'd never look into your glittering glasses again. And that your secret would die with you. What was it you told me just before I left about some operation or other which the Russians proposed and which would have killed me?"

Volodya drew a sharp intake of breath: the least Ward could have done was to keep his mouth shut, damn him. Who asked him to talk? He himself had begged Volodya to say nothing about it to Lionel and not get him involved in the exchange of telegrams.

"Oh?" said Ward, twitching his nostrils.

"What was it? I didn't catch on at first, but now I'm curious to know."

"The operation would have meant a great risk," Ward said, watching Volodya out of the tail of his eye. "It was practically impossible. . . ."

"Yes but if they suggested it, I mean these people", Lionel nodded at Volodya, "it means that things don't look too bright for me, doesn't it? Or do you take me for an utter fool?"

Volodya left them.

This conversation had nothing to do with him now.

Let Ward supply all the answers, let him answer if he could.

About twenty minutes later, not more, he saw Ward getting into his jeep and driving off, and soon afterwards the ship's feldsher came looking for him to tell him that Lyonya was cursing and calling for the doctor.

"Do you know what?" Lionel said to him the moment he entered the sick bay. "Suddenly I understood everything. Don't worry, doc, I'm not going to bother you with all this beastly story. It doesn't concern anybody now except my uncle, Lord Torpenthow, and his top-drawer doctors. They're the ones responsible for everything. To hell with them, I have understood something else, something that really matters. . . ."

"And all I understand is that you're drunk," Volodya said crossly.

"A bit. But it doesn't matter now, you know. Only please don't interrupt or I'll get muddled. This is what I wanted to

say: the whole thing about my operation, which they wouldn't let you do, has even a philosophical meaning. Have a drink?"

"All right. Thanks."

"Yes, a philosophical meaning. And a very deep one. I'm no good at putting my thoughts into words, but what I mean to say is: we always put things off, we don't like to take the responsibility, and don't dare take a risk. This, in fact, is our traditional policy. D'you see? Ward is not to blame. He's simply a fool. Incidentally, he told me everything, and I know now. He told me because the responsibility is no longer his. But I gave him a bit of a scare, I told him I'd ask you to put me in your hospital and go ahead with the operation, but he had an answer for that one, too. He said you couldn't because my health belongs to my country and my country has forbidden the operation. Get the idea?"

Lionel laughed.

"The country, it appears, is my uncle Lord Torpenthew.... However, enough has been said. I think I'll go to sleep now, and you'll let me stay on deck again tomorrow, won't you? I'd like to watch all the excitement from below."

"Why?"

"Oh, because from above all battles look like so much silly nonsense, a wicked game, but a game anyway, and from here...."

"I have never watched it from above, but I don't think it would ever strike me as a bit of excitement or a game," Volodya said.

Lionel listened attentively, as he always did, and after a moment's reflection said:

"Your thinking is too stolid, it wants lightness. You take things too seriously. It's more in character with Anglo-Saxons than Slavs. And you're touchy, too. I believe you're inclined to use the same high-sounding expressions my uncle likes so much, like 'those holy graves'."

"There are holy graves," Volodya muttered.

"Yes, of course, provided they don't contain the remains of vain windbags, bungling admirals and conceited idiots like my uncle Lord Torpenthew. But as a rule theirs are the remains that lie in graves, safeguarded by the law, and in family tombs. And my brother Johnnie, for instance, was crushed so hard into the sand by some bastard, one of Rommel's tankmen, with the tracks of his tank, that there was nothing left of him to bury even."

"Let's not talk about it."

"Why shouldn't we? Harold, my eldest brother, was murdered by the nazis in Hamburg in the summer of 1938. He was an intelligence officer, you see, and he hated Munich and all the rest of it. I remember him shouting at my uncle that we'd be in for it if we didn't get really together with the Russians. And it was Englishmen who betrayed him to the nazis. Yes, yes, don't goggle—they were playing bridge, those two Mosley men with two of Ribbentrop's diplomats, and they named my brother. Don't look so surprised, the French Cagoulaards did the same, we know quite a lot now, but not all. . . ."

He remained silent for a minute or two, and then continued: "Harold's body was never found. Never. And my uncle—a well-informed man at all times—said even then that people like him, that is like my uncle, had too much in common with them."

"With whom?"

"With the nazis, of course, only please don't get angry now. . . ."

"You are angry with your uncle, aren't you?"

"I don't give a hang for any of them," Lionel snapped drowsily. "Only I don't want to die tomorrow or the day after. There must be at least one decent chap to feed the maggots in our family tomb, and I want that decent chap to be me. And tomorrow I'll get good and drunk so I won't keep thinking about my bullet all the time. . . ."

"Good, get drunk. . . ."

"And will I be taken up on deck again?"

"If you like, Lionel."

Volodya switched off the ceiling light and left only a small night lamp burning.

"Am I to be left all by myself?" Lionel whispered.

"No. I'll be sleeping here, because I've nowhere else," Volodya lied to him. "I'll just go and have something to eat."

"Some of that millet porridge of yours?"

"Yes, our millet porridge."

"But I've got a bagful of tins here!" Lionel spoke in a furious, sibilant whisper. "It's too silly, really! I can't eat anything, tinned stuff especially. Please take the lot to the saloon, do me a favour. There's pineapple. And chicken. And bacon. . . ."

"Do you know what you're saying?" Volodya asked in a quiet voice.

"I don't!" Lionel shouted at his departing back. "I don't understand your insane pride, damn it!"

Volodya shut the door tight after him.

From the ship next to theirs came the crow of a cock who had long lost his sense of time in these latitudes. The bells went with a gentle, fragile, crystal-clear sound, and again Volodya was unable to tell the time of day. However, what did it matter? His wrist watch still didn't go.

In the saloon he sat down to a meal served by Auntie Polya. It was millet porridge, followed by a cup of something she called cocoa—a greyish-brown beverage with a woolly smell.

"I wonder why it's called cocoa?" Volodya asked her.

"The cook has put it down as cocoa on the menu. He knows best," Auntie Polya answered huffily. "The Captain liked it well enough, he said you couldn't make a better drink out of sawdust."

Petrokovsky came in, took off his oilcloth raincoat, raised the lid of the piano, and began to pick out the tune of the *Blue Scarf*, singing the verse:

*Always remember
Our words so tender,
Cherish them, dear, in your heart....*

"Don't, for heaven's sake!" Volodya implored.

"Anything to oblige," Petrokovsky said complaisantly, and then asked, "What's wrong with me, doctor, it's a mental disorder maybe, but the stink of TNT is driving me nuts, it seems to be everywhere. I ate a whole grain of garlic, but it didn't help."

"Forget it."

"Will that help?"

"Sure."

"Is there no medicine against it?"

"The only medicine is the end of the war."

"You're right there," Petrokovsky agreed. "You hit the nail on the head that time!"

He turned to the piano again and sang:

*Our last good-bye by the river,
Do you remember, sweetheart?
You said you'd wait and be mine forever,
And gave me your pretty blue scarf....*

Pushing his plate away, Volodya finished his letter to Varya.

"You're right about everything, Ginger, I know I can't live without you. I always knew it. I do realise it, but I'm so damned stiff-necked by nature, it's difficult to change. This time, too, I

imagined things, I suspected betrayal—the most heinous crime I know in the world. But I only imagined it, and if it comes to that I am much guiltier than you. You don't love him, you didn't leave me for him, you were abandoned by me, or so you thought, and you let everything go hang. I understand everything, but I'm too slow to understand sometimes, and that's the whole trouble, my darling. And words stick in my throat. But you know everything about me far better than I do myself. It doesn't matter that we have to part again just now, we'll find each other again, we have to find each other. And do give your glamour boy the boot, it may be stupid of me but he does give me a pain in the neck, and thinking. . . ."

"Writing home?" Petrokovsky asked.

"Yes," Volodya said, writing the address on the envelope. "It is home."

"Any news?" he asked.

"About the convoys, you mean?" Petrokovsky asked.

"Yes."

"That's something the Almighty Himself has only a rough idea about. Or none at all. Such is the law of convoys."

"I wonder if you're going ashore?"

"You want the letter mailed? The letter box is very near, it's only a five minute walk," Petrokovsky told him.

"What did you have for supper? Millet porridge?" Lionel asked Volodya sleepily when he came back after mailing the letter.

"Millet porridge it was. And cocoa. And lobsters, crayfish, oysters, shrimps and what are the other things they eat in your fashionable world? Yes, soufflé, that's it! And then coffee, liqueurs, and fruit out of season, naturally."

"Go to hell, doc. I was lying here and thinking. We'll arrive at our port of destination, Reykjavik or something, isn't it? We'll arrive there, and you'll give a sumptuous lunch for all those idiots who'll come on board, and there'll be Russian caviar, and vodka, and borshch and blini, there'll be everything. And all of you will pretend you don't care a damn for those things, you'll smoke your thick Russian cigarettes lettered in gold, and Commodore Graves of the Admiralty will tuck away your caviar with a soup spoon, and he'll drop a hint to your Captain that he'd love a tin to take home, and your Captain will give it to him. Caviar and vodka and cigarettes. . . ."

"Well, what if he does?"

"But it's stupid."

"I don't know," Volodya said. "Why stupid? I don't see it. We'd better sleep, Lionel, it's quite late."

"Everything's stupid," Lionel murmured, sighing heavily. "Everything's hopelessly stupid and beastly. It's all so sick-making. You know, thinking tires me terribly. That discovery I made about the stinking bastard Ward and about my uncle, and about everything generally, gives me no peace. Are you very sleepy?"

"Very," Volodya said, wanting Lionel to fall asleep. But nothing could be further from his mind—he wanted to talk. "Tomorrow!" Volodya told him. "Sleep now."

"Then give me a shot, because if you don't you'll get no peace, and by morning I'll be biting people's heads off."

Volodya sighed resignedly, and got up to boil the syringe.

When they woke up the convoy was already at sea.

After a stinging, cold shower, Volodya went up to the navigation bridge to Captain Amirajibi, took the extra binoculars from the hook, looked and gasped, stunned by the panorama unrolling before him. As far as the eye could see there were huge transports and powerful warships. And in the clear, pale-blue northern sky, sailed the balloons, silver on the sunny side and black in the shadow, and higher still, in the transparent blue, small and nimble fighter planes patrolling this great floating city. "God, how beautiful!" Volodya said aloud, involuntarily.

"So beautiful that you want to take a snapshot, keep it, and never see it again, as they say in Odessa," Amirajibi said testily.

Volodya looked at him and noticed the bags under his angrily glittering eyes and the tired droop of his shoulders.

"I don't want to start a panic, and I trust this will go no further," Amirajibi said in a low, angry voice. "But we might be in for a jolly round dance if those battleships, *Admiral Scheer*, *Tirpitz*, *Lutzow* and the heavy cruiser *Admiral Hipper* and the light cruisers *Köln* and *Nürnberg*, with all their destroyers and submarines get onto us. Can you picture it?"

"No," Volodya said, shrugging. He really could not picture a thing like that happening.

"There would be quite a dust-up. And work for you, too."

"I have everything ready."

"I don't doubt it. But it may be harder here than on firm ground."

"Yes, of course," Volodya nodded.

"There are specific features to be considered." Amirajibi con-

tinued. "We are not in the habit of abandoning a ship while she's afloat. We fight to the last. But we have to get the wounded off in good time. And your Englishman, that fifth earl, as well. You are responsible for the safety of all of them, you know."

"Yes sir."

Going down to the spar deck it suddenly struck Volodya that Amirajibi had been pulling his leg, but he dismissed the thought at once. Everything—the Oerlikon gunners, the machine-gunners, the first-aid men with their kits, the ship's military commandant in his black navy uniform, the helmets worn by the men, the air of efficient readiness and keen alertness—all this told him that things were not expected to blow over, this was war and there would be battle.

But the wind blew gently, the sun shone generously and gaily, and Lionel was so happy to be up on deck again in the salty air that tickled the nostrils, that Volodya decided to put off the thought of war till the hour struck, and in the meantime simply enjoy life insofar as it was his to enjoy.

"Shall we play?" Lionel asked with his charmingly roguish expression.

"Let's."

"But do try to remember things! There's no sense in it otherwise. I'll never teach you anything if you keep thinking of your girl. By the way, do you have a girl?"

"No." Volodya replied gruffly.

"You're getting on, and no girl yet!"

"Do you?"

"Not yet. Actually, I never did anything yet."

A light flush suffused his face: this wartime flyer had not even learnt to talk smut yet.

"You see how it is, doc. I did go to a place once after a gig race, but it was a complete flop. The girls called me Goldilocks and pushed a huge, sticky sweet into my mouth by sheer force. Afterwards I got plastered, and that's all that happened."

Volodya was smiling—he felt such an old, wise serpent. He smiled, looking at the flaxen curls fluttering in the wind, and thought: "If you do fall in love, you'll know what torture it is, poor, silly boy. You'll live with a wedge driven into your soul, and keep smiling."

"When I was very young, I never managed to get anything done," Lionel said. "I was always late everywhere. Time always seemed too short, if you know what I mean. . . ."

And waving his hand, with the ring on the fourth finger, he began to whistle very softly. This was, in fact, the game they played, invented by Lionel.

"Well?" he asked after a little.

"It's Scriabin," Volodya said in a taut voice.

"Goodness, you really must be deaf. Listen again."

And once again he whistled the melody, then hummed it softly to help Volodya answer correctly.

"I swear it's Scriabin." Volodya insisted stubbornly.

"Very flattering, but it's really Lionel Neville, Opus 9."

"It sounds very much like Scriabin."

"Think so? And what's this?"

Volodya listened gravely.

"Now that certainly is Scriabin."

Lionel gave a peal of happy laughter.

"It's a song called *Cats on the Rooftops*. It's a rather bawdy song. No, doc, you don't know a thing about music. . . ."

He was still laughing when it started. And it was not he but Volodya who first noticed the blood. It was bright crimson, and so much of it gushed out at once, that for a moment he lost his presence of mind. Together with a sailor who happened to be nearby, they carried Lionel down to the sick bay. The bleeding had stopped, his eyes were closed. The heavy pulsing of the ship's engines sounded louder here, or perhaps it was the blades rotating in the cold sea water. And on the other side of the wall, in the galley, the cook was singing in a plaintive croon:

*And in my dreams
That brighten the darkest of skies,
I see you, dearest,
Wearing the blue scarf
Matching the blue of your eyes. . . .*

The *Blue Scarf*, if nothing else, already held the *Alexander Pushkin* in its throes, it seemed.

"Was it a secondary hemorrhage again?" Lionel asked. "Was it bad?"

"No, very slight." Volodya lied.

"I spurted blood like a stuck pig! If that was slight, I wonder what a bad hemorrhage will be like. . . ."

"You'd better not talk."

"And then I'll live to be a hundred?"

"I asked you not to talk. And it's nothing to get so terribly

excited about, in a minute I'll fill you up with as much blood as you've just lost. I've any amount of excellent blood here."

The ship's feldsher Milenushkin came, and they began the blood transfusion.

"Why, it really is simple!" Lionel exclaimed ironically. "A sort of perpetual motor."

"Even simpler."

"You mean you'll go on refilling me all the time now?"

"Yes, and in England they'll remove the bullet and you'll forget all about this."

"I say, doctor," Lionel said when they had finished with the transfusion. "Won't you get it in the neck from your Communists for bothering so with me? After all, you know, I'm not exactly 'one of you', although one of your airmen in the hospital told me I was, after we'd had a little drink on the quiet. He also advised me to hurry up and open the Second Front and get started. To think. . . ." he let the sentence trail.

"To think what?"

"To think that I might have brought him down the way it happened to me over some sea or other. . . ."

"Or he—you."

"Exactly. But it makes no difference. What does, what really matters is that blokes who are beginning to catch on, catch on when it's too late. . . ."

"In what sense—too late?"

"In the sense of hemoglobin, for instance. When I was in the hospital, I overheard Ward letting the cat out of the bag. You people know how to keep your damned medical secrets, but Ward can't even do that. . . ."

He lay pushing the black ring up and down his thin finger, and then closed his eyes.

"Tired?"

"Pour me a drop of whisky, will you. You've lost to me on Scriabin, you know."

Volodya poured him some whisky, but Lionel did not drink it.

"How disgusting," he said and sighed.

His thoughts were far away.

"Will you try to sleep?" Volodya suggested.

After a long reflective silence Lionel asked, "What did you say?"

His glance was vacant, his mind seemed to be wandering. But no, quite the contrary, it appeared that he was doggedly pursuing the same train of thought.

"No, no, you can't put me off. That bloke might have been fighting against me if we had been set on each other. D'you see? He, too, wouldn't have had time to do anything yet in life, neither of us would have done anything yet, except finish each other off."

He closed his eyes, and his face—the thin face of a suffering little girl trying to look like a boy, was dimmed, as it were. The face framed in soft, damp, tousled curls.

Without opening his eyes, he said very quietly: "Please let me talk while I can. Or are these secondary hemorrhages so slight? I've much too little talking left to do in terms of time, like being in a plane when your fuel's running out. Those refillings or refuellings of yours are nothing. The hemoglobin in the stuff you pump into me is too thin, I suppose. . . ."

He did not finish, and smiling at some thought, fell into a doze.

Trying not to let himself think, Volodya sighed, carefully wrapped the bloody towels in paper, and threw the bundle overboard. And only then, standing on deck, he noticed that even though the ships were moving at their former speed, there was a change. Before he could grasp just what had changed, the anti-aircraft guns went into action, first on the warships and then on the transports.

To port rose a solid wall of roaring fire, but in spite of the wavering greenish-pink stream of light-killing tracer bullets, the German torpedo planes, never swerving or turning aside, were closing in. They came low over the water, spread out upon it, hugging the surface, their engines wailing, tearing towards a point where they could usefully drop their torpedoes—and now they dropped them, at precisely the same moment as dive bombers began to come on in waves from the rear and the right of the convoy. At first, it was not clear to Volodya which of them did what, but in the light of the bright, sunny day, he saw lines of torpedo planes abreast ramming the wall of fire, and overhead the dive bombers, above them. And then, in the howling roar of the ship's choking anti-aircraft guns, the increasing rattle of machine-guns he stopped trying to understand or size things up. The only thing he realised clearly was that there must be work waiting for him already. He grabbed a helmet off a hook and as he was tightening the chin strap he saw beside him, right there in front of him, the pointed little face of Milenushkin, freckled and ginger-browed, who was stuttering, as usual, from timidity.

"What?" Ustimenko shouted.

"O. K." Milenushkin yelled back. "Okay so far!"

Volodya waved and ran to the navigation bridge. From there everything looked clearer, but he thought his ear drums would burst from the roar of the guns firing somewhere very close. Captain Amirajibi, his bronze face bathed in sweat, stood beside the helmsman, and Ustimenko heard the signaller shouting to the Captain almost simultaneously: "Enemy bomber to starboard!" and "Torpedoes!" and Amirajibi instantly ordering the helmsman: "Hard a'starboard!" The helmsman answered smartly: "Aye, aye, sir. Hard a'starboard!" The wail of the bombs passed them quite close. The Captain gave the order: "On course", and suddenly there was a lull, even though the machine-guns on the bows still rattled on.

"Get the idea?" Amirajibi said to Volodya huskily, and coughed to clear his throat.

"Was this the jolly round dance you meant?"

"No, my dear doctor, this was only the dance of the cygnets from *Swan Lake*. It was just a tiny taste of war. . . ."

When he had finally cleared his throat and had deftly lit a cigarette in the wind, he asked: "Did you see the *Pharaoh* go down?"

"No, I didn't."

"It was sudden. Over in a second. The poor chaps couldn't have seen it coming. They got two direct hits. There come the corvettes now, see them darting about, still hoping to pick up survivors. . . ."

The signaller shouted: "I see the Commodore's signal: flags at half mast."

"Flags at half mast," Amirajibi turned round to pass the order.

He took off his helmet, wiped the sweat of war from his forehead with a white handkerchief clutched in a hand that still trembled, and spoke in a tired, quiet, intimate voice:

"Rest in peace. Never will the Soviet people forget you. May your glory live through the centuries, men of the sea, brothers in arms! May the angry deep be a warm, soft bed for you, our fighting eagles, to rest you in your eternal sleep" It sounded like a prayer, but suddenly his tone changed and he said resentfully: "If only your destroyers had fired with the main battery like the *Svetly* did, not a plane could have broken through! And incidentally no one has done it yet except Rodion—fired from the whole side from a distance of seventy cable

lengths. That's what I call a first-class commander, he whams at them and never lets them come near. And they, they just gaped." Angrily, he made a gaping grimace.

Then he gave Volodya's shoulder a thump and said: "You're too serious, my dear doctor! Remember how you saved my life that day in the baths? And now confess, in the face of mortal danger: was it your needle?"

"I plead guilty!" Volodya said, beaming happily.

"Of course! I shadowed you when you went back to dress. And I've been wondering about it ever since."

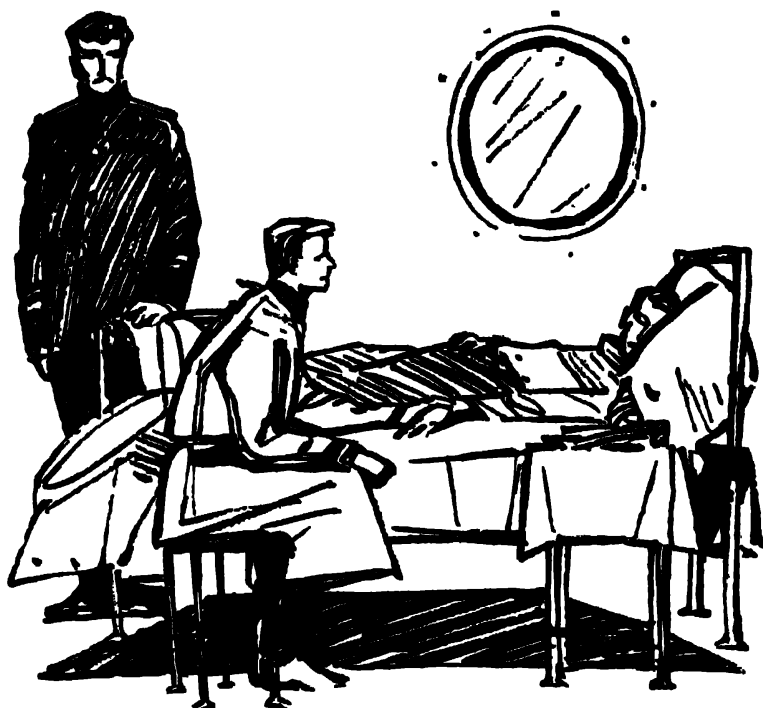
"I am sorry. But I was afraid you might turn out to be an admiral and I'd be subjected to all sorts of indignities."

"You won't now," Amirajibi told him. "I've forgiven you, and if we're fated to meet in the deep, we'll meet like good friends. Go to your Englishman now, and don't leave him unnecessarily."

Afterwards, recalling those hours, days and nights, those submarine attacks and the series of depth charges under the gleaming rays of the sun, recalling the wailing, spread-eagled shadows of the four-engined torpedo planes attempting to break through to the convoy, the American sailors the *Pushkin* picked up after their *Paola*, while still afloat, had been fired on by the English patrol-vessel and finished off by a German bomber, recalling a steward of the *Paola* screaming hysterically that he could clearly see a "big German fleet", recollecting this trip in detail, as he worked on his official report Ustimenko wrote down in his large hand:

"My observations testify to the correctness of the point of view maintaining that had there been a fundamentally different approach to questions of the viability of vessels, the number of victims suffering from overcooling would have been ten times fewer—in other words, there would have been only a few isolated cases, which would have undoubtedly proved the insolvency of the stand taken by the allies' Naval Medical Service, a stand which unfortunately supports the radically erroneous point of view of the British Admiralty that it is impossible to bring Arctic convoys through safely. . . ."

But he wrote this paragraph at a much later date, and in the meantime he only made his observations, worked and reflected, his opinion on the events he witnessed as yet not completely formed.



Chapter 11

You Are Just Being Born

Lionel, who did not know that Volodya had little else to do on the *Pushkin*, often said to him: "Don't waste your time on me, you've not enough of it to permit yourself the luxury of sitting here with me like a Carmelite nun. Go to your wounded and your immersion cases. I know for sure now that, even if you're not there, the chaps on this ship won't abandon me no matter how hot things get. Go then, doctor!"

Ustimenko would boil the syringe, give Lionel his injection, and with the sleeves of his white coat still rolled up to the elbow, go up on deck. The wind blew in cold, whistling gusts over the sea, the sun floated in a dazzlingly clear sky, the constant roll

and pitch made him slightly seasick and dizzy, but he tried not to show it. After all, he was wearing the uniform of a naval officer.

Lionel, swaddled in Auntie Polya's shawl, lay on his stretcher, looking down from the sick-bay superstructure, questioning the *Paola* survivors, his lower lip stuck out aggressively. "Damn you and your talk," he cursed, "I'm sick and tired of the lot of you. D'you hear me?"

"Did you hear them?" he asked Volodya afterwards. "They were simply abandoned by our convoy when they were on their way to you. Our dear Admiralty had ordered the commander of the convoy to give the transports the right to sail independently, which, translated into normal language means: run for your life. Your ships weren't close enough, it happened before they had reached your zone of operation. Are you listening, or aren't you allowed to talk about it?"

"You'd better tell it to your admirals."

"Talking about bad admirals is not done in polite society. No, there's something much worse here."

"Tell them that as well."

"If only your science knew how to refuel me with hemoglobin. . . ."

"What would you do then?"

"What would I do then?" Lionel repeated. He took his time to answer, a pale smile touching his lips. "I'd do the right thing. I know quite a lot now. And I have no tutor to obey any more, I had one in my childhood in Surrey and Essex. I no longer care to play golf, either. Hemoglobin, that's what I need, but there isn't anything anyone can do about it. . . ."

"How you do harp on the hemoglobin!"

"If one has plenty of hemoglobin one can do a lot, that is if one doesn't fight in the air only. That's why I'm so sorry about it. It's not enough, you know, to be a passable pilot, even though you went to Jesus College at Oxford where it's so nice and cosy, and where the bell rings every day exactly as many times as we have students. . . ."

He was still smiling, a soft, secret smile, and his thoughts were perfectly lucid even though he seemed to ramble at times. But Volodya had become used to his manner by now, and he understood everything he said.

"Did you know that our officials, our diplomats, are not allowed to accept foreign orders? I remember reading somewhere that our good Queen Bess, who reigned about three hundred and

fifty years ago you know, spoke her mind on this subject with a coarseness worthy of her time. She said something to the effect that she wanted her curs to wear none but her own collars. But what if I don't want to wear anybody's collar? Not any collar at all?"

"It's not done in your world, I believe," Volodya said glumly.

"I don't care what is and what is not done, I simply refuse to wear anyone's collar. I refuse to say: 'Ah, Dostoyevsky, ah, the great Russian soul!' and then do what my uncle and his friends the Mosley men are trying to do. They are successful sometimes, too. Perhaps I'd never have seen the dirty side of it if it hadn't touched my own self. It's so obvious in my case, it's all done so crudely. Or do you think, perhaps, that I'm the sort of fool who doesn't understand anything at all? Or that I've had too little to do with convoys?"

"Everyone can see it, I think," Volodya muttered. "Even those who wear collars."

"They don't just wear them. Everyone is trying to earn that collar, it's funny but true. . . . However, to hell with them, with the collars I mean, I was going to tell you about the last convoy. You people don't know how it all got started, but we've got people who do know all the circumstances. And the circumstances gave birth to a joke. This joke got about, and my uncle enjoys repeating it, I'm sure. It's a play on words, rather flat and exceedingly nasty. I'm an Englishman, and I take my country seriously, so seriously, in fact, that I couldn't repeat this joke even to you, doctor. They want you to see that circumstances are stronger sometimes than our desire to help you. That's what they're playing this whole dirty game for. And that's why I feel so rotten. . . ."

He spoke quickly now, in a low, tired voice; it was as though an angry fire burnt inside him, feeding his strength sufficiently for him to tell Volodya all about the "disappearance" of some heavy nazi ships from Brest, the French port, disappearing as mysteriously as they would in a good thriller, slipping unnoticed past the Royal Navy, and then popping up again on the route of the Arctic convoys.

"See? It's exactly the same in my case, or very nearly so. Let that Neville person die from his secondary hemorrhages, but we're not taking any risks. After all, we're mere men. Do you catch on? It's the Bosches, you see, and not the Torpenthows and the Wards who are to blame for our failure to fulfill our part.

of the agreement and deliver the promised cargo. We're mere men, as Ward, that silly ass, says. But surely there are times when we've got to be more than mere men. Much more. It'll take people who are more than mere men to squash the nazis. Mere men is too flexible a concept, no wonder Pétain mentions it so often."

Lionel got out of breath, Volodya told him to stop talking, but he refused to listen. The angry fire was burning ever brighter and stronger, and it could not be quenched.

"Foul play . . . You don't go in for sport, so you can't know what a sick-making thing foul play is, especially when it's premeditated and prearranged. I was catapulted into the sky twice, remember that convoy last winter, in March rather? Twice in one day. And then once again. First when we were between Medvezhka and Nordkap, and then when we were already approaching your bay. It was hard work, but what was the bloody use if the whole point of the Wards and the Torpenthows is to do their damndest not to deliver the promised cargo?"

He choked and gasped. Volodya bent over him. And grabbed for a towel.

"Again!" Lionel brought out at last. "Again, and it won't stop. . . ."

Milenushkin brought more towels. The blood went on trickling from Lionel's mouth, and would not stop. It was not until about two hours later, after they had carried him back to bed, that Lionel recovered sufficiently to ask: "How much longer have I?"

"This wouldn't happen if you didn't talk so much," Volodya told him. "The main thing is absolute quiet."

"Yes. But still?"

"You have a long, great life ahead of you, Lieutenant," Volodya tried to make the lie more convincing by addressing him thus formally. "A great, long, and very exciting life."

"You think so?" Lionel said doubtfully, yet wanting to believe. "Are you sure?"

"For heaven's sake don't make yourself out a martyr!" Volodya exclaimed. "You should see what others in this world have to suffer!"

"Hopeless cases?"

Volodya did not answer. Lionel chuckled.

"Please don't be afraid of upsetting me by telling me about the sufferings of others. When we are sick, we love to hear that

our neighbour is worse off than we are. It actually comforts us for some reason. Especially if that neighbour is a bastard like that Panamese who stole and hid two life belts and eleven jackets, he just went and stole them from his own sailors. . . ."

And, brightening up, Lionel began to tell him all about the "Panamese bastard" whose own best friend had promised to stick a knife into him if he ever did anything like that again. He was alive, this boy, quite alive, and only Volodya knew that he was already living on borrowed time. This was artificial life, the heart still worked and fed the brain, but not of its own power, it was merely doing what Dr. Ustimenko forced it to do with the endless blood transfusions and injections.

"Oh yes, we were talking about our traditions," Lionel remembered, his good humour completely restored. "Traditions! What a laugh. Have you heard about the fire that broke out in the House of Commons in London? You haven't? Well, this story just shows you our traditions: the doorman flatly refused to let the firemen into the burning building because they weren't members of Parliament. Can you beat it?"

He laughed at his own joke, then relapsed into a pensive silence, and suddenly asked very seriously: "It's too amazingly stupid that I won't be there to see how it ends. I may be conceited, you tick me off for it often enough, but just the same. . . ."

"What?"

"I think I'd be jolly useful after the war when they put their foot down in London, in Washington and in Paris too, and say: 'We've played the fool long enough, we've had enough of all those Maquis, Resistances, guerrillas and compliments to the Russians. There's a lawful government now!' That's when we'd come in pretty useful. But there'll be too few of us left, unfortunately, and those who are will merely sigh and trudge along the old beaten track." And then he added: "I've got friends in France. They say that already now their Resistance is being 'denounced' as revolution."

Towards midnight Lionel grew worse again. He could not hear or understand very well. His thoughts became confused, and a blue pallor spread over his face and his thin neck.

"Ah, doctor, why can't this irreversible process be more jolly!" he said with a heavy sigh. "Surely you might have learnt by this time how to ship poor us to the nether shores in greater comfort?"

His thoughts wandered to cars, he talked of Daimlers, Jaguars and Bentleys.

Volodya was washing his hands when Milenushkin asked with his pale lips alone: "How is it?"

"Terrible," Volodya replied as soundlessly, and suddenly felt his chin trembling uncontrollably.

"Go outside," Milenushkin said, stuttering. "Please go out, you mustn't stay here now. Go on, Comrade Major, I'll manage. . . ."

Choking, Volodya went out.

He stood there, pressing his forehead to the emergency raft outside the sick bay, gripping the breech end of the Oerliken, and repeated aloud as an incantation: "You must not die! I can't bear you to die! Do you hear?"

But, of course, there was no one to hear him, and no one to answer him.

"I can't have you die!" he forced out through clenched teeth, without breathing. "You have no right to die. You're only just being born. You are only coming into the world! You're still only a little boy, a child, you must live! Don't die! I don't want you to die!"

The engines throbbed with a low, steady rhythm in the ship's abysmal belly, the rudder drove her on, a biting, salty wind whistled unconcerned, the hurrying waves glittered in the cold sun, the bronzed, tattooed and half-drunk survivors who had already quarrelled among themselves were rolling dice with a clatter, and there, right there on the other side of the white wall, in the sick bay, a boy lay dying. Everyone else, in spite of the war and the hazards, had a lifetime ahead, and he had so very little time left. Hardly any. Volodya knew it as surely as he knew that nothing could help him now.

Having dashed cold water into his face from a fire hose, and wiped it off with the skirt of his white coat he went back to the sick bay. Lionel was still dozing, semi-conscious, and Volodya poured some whisky into a medicine glass, drank it at a gulp to Milenushkin's astonishment, which, however, he was past noticing. Then he sat down on the cot next to Lionel's, dropped his chin into his hand, and told Milenushkin that he could go.

"I'll go down to the saloon," Milenushkin said. "I'll be working there. . . ."

"Go ahead. . . ."

"In case of anything. . . ."

"I know without you telling me what I must do in case of anything."

Milenushkin retreated in fright.

Somewhere to the left the Germans were launching depth charges again.

Lionel moaned and tried to sit up.

"It's all right. Lie still," Volodya told him sternly.

"I feel so rotten," Lionel said piteously. "It's at though there's a rat gnawing at my insides somewhere. I hurt all over, and everything sort of swims. Give me some water, please."

He drank a little, lay still for a moment, and then said in a sharp, imperious voice: "I want to go up on deck. It's stifling in here. Is this morning or evening?"

"It's night, Lionel. And it's cold and windy on deck."

"I don't care."

"I shouldn't recommend it, Lionel."

"Why? Will it do me harm? Hardly! I'd like them to make us some coffee, I've a whole tin, let them use it all. No one's asleep, you know, it's our last night on board, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is," Volodya's throat was constricted.

"The last night! I want to be among people on this last night."

"But I'm here, Lionel."

"You alone are not enough for this special night. I'd very much like the Captain to come, a cup of coffee will do him good, and also the Chief Officer and the stewardess. And also the sailor who fished me out of the water, let him come too, he's shy of me and has never been to see me once. I have some really excellent brandy besides! So why shouldn't I have a party? Let's have a real binge, shall we?"

Years later, in peacetime, recalling that night—the last night on board, as Lionel called it—Volodya reproached himself sorely for his imprudence. But at the time, on that crazy night when, after ruminating on the maxim that man was to man a wolf, he was again granted the joy of realising the simple truth that man was, of course, a brother to man—he acted without thinking whether the excitement would be good or bad for the dying boy. Most probably they did wrong to carry him out into the icy wind, but a man sentenced to death is entitled to a last wish, and so they moved out on deck with coffee, brandy, glasses and cups. The wolves—the survivors from the hired crews—crowded round them, closing in, hoping something would come their way, but Lionel told them to get away.

And, smiling with his parched lips, he explained to Volodya: "When they were in Russia, they sold people the sandwiches they got from you at fixed rates, and made a thousand per cent profit. And now they'll get gold in exchange for their takings. They bragged about it to me themselves. And they weren't ashamed that you eat millet porridge, I mean you people who are saving the world from the nazis. . . ."

He peered down intently at the survivors.

"It's a mean thought to have on a night like this, but they might have served the nazis too if they were hired, mightn't they? They really have wolves' eyes, they glow in the darkness," said the dying boy who was too young to have seen any wolves yet.

But he understood everything, the way Ustimenko understood it himself. He was a new man, born in the icy, whistling, Arctic night, his birth attended by an agony of moral torment, born—only to vanish for ever.

"What's so surprising about doctors blowing their brains out sometimes?" thought Volodya much later, recalling that night on board ship, that last night.

· We Must Go On and On

Amirajibi came to Lionel's party with a face that looked pinched and ashen in the night, and in need of a shave. Petrovsky came too, as smart as ever in a white sweater and a moleskin jacket. The cook, jauntily wearing his starched white cap, brought in the coffee, made for the English Lyonya according to all the intricate rules of coffee-making practised on the *Pushkin*. Auntie Polya got out the treasured Gardner cups that belonged to a dinner service, and carried them in on a tray as gracefully as on that day in peacetime, so remote now, when she had waited on a congress of physiologists. The man who had pulled Lionel out of the water—a pock-marked, middle-aged able seaman with a frightful cold—came and stood apart from the rest so their guest wouldn't catch it from him "on the very threshold of his Motherland" he said. Quickly gulping down his glass of Martel and following it with a bit of onion, he went back to his machine-guns, and Lionel smiled his weak, tired smile.

His eyes expressed a strange contentment. It seemed mad and wicked that he was dying, that nothing could be done to hold him back, that this boy who was so weak physically and yet

possessed such enormous moral strength, dying yet still amazingly alive and earthly, that this man who was only then being born would soon be completed dissolved in nothingness.

"Well," said Lionel, still smiling. "It won't be long now, will it, Captain?"

Amirajibi, startled but recovering quickly, picked up his glass, took a sip, and nodded.

"I don't suppose so," he said with a ship master's wariness. "Your health, Lieutenant Neville!"

Petrokovsky also drank Neville's health.

"Don't forget the coffee," Lionel said. "Please drink your coffee. And have another glass of brandy or whatever else we've got there. Doctor, do pour yourself a glass of something."

Volodya did, but forgot to drink it.

"I once read somewhere, quite recently, in fact," Lionel said, his voice suddenly sharp, "that some of those who make history treat the human race rather coolly, and that's why history is sometimes made at the expense of people. Let's drink to men who give a thought to humanity when making history..."

He took a sip and glanced about him with quick, frightened eyes.

Amirajibi finished his cup of coffee, and giving Volodya's shoulder a shake, understanding the ordeal ahead of him, went back to his bridge. A messenger came for Petrokovsky, Auntie Polya collected the cups and glasses on a tray and took them away, and now the two of them were left alone in the greenish light of the night, with the wind blowing in cold, resilient blasts—the Russian medical officer, in a doctor's white coat worn on top of his naval officer's uniform, and the dying boy with girlish curls on his forehead and the sides of his face, a boy so fearless that he had the courage to ask: "Is it all over, doctor?"

But he was already past understanding. Volodya's reply did not reach him. Yet he talked on, he promised Volodya that when they got home they would have some good old alc, they would drink it out of earthenware mugs, it would be nice and cool, and then he would play for him his Opus 2, Opus 7 and Opus 9.

"It's rather nice, you know," he said, trying to sit up and find Volodya with eyes that could no longer see. "The dinner gong, and Mother, and all of us coming in. But who's there to come now?"

As in a bad dream Volodya saw Milenushkin come close to take a look at Lionel and spring back... Again and again the bells

went, and morning came, Lionel's last. His thoughts became more and more hopelessly tangled. He seemed to be sliding down a slippery incline, and dreading the unknown, into which he was being drawn with such irresistible force. And so he wouldn't feel so frightened and alone, Volodya took Lionel's hands in his, realising that this was the end. With his big, hot, strong palms he squeezed and rubbed the boy's weak hands that were already growing cold. He did it senselessly, not as a doctor, but as a brother. He gazed into the boy's seeking, lost, perplexed eyes, and said over and over, softly, in Russian: "It's all right, Lionel, everything will be fine, you'll get well. Everything will be wonderful."

But what could be wonderful in this world where the honest and the clean died before the rotten and the cowardly? What? And Volodya continued to rub his hands and gaze into his eyes until the doctor in him told him, the man and the brother, that Lionel was no more and all there was now was something called a body.

He and Milenushkin laid out the body in the blue uniform of the Royal Air Force, with the silver wings on the sleeves of the jacket. British fighter planes were already barraging the convoy, and the roar of their motors when they turned the circle did not violate the sublimity of the peace in which Lieutenant Neville was now to rest forever. It sounded as the only music, solemn and wrathful, that could be worthy of Lionel.

And strangely the suffering little girl pretending to be a brave boy was no more. The person lying there, in the white, muted glare of the hospital lamps was a young man—strong and frail and infinitely, unbearably lonely. . . .

With his own pocket comb Volodya combed back the flaxen curls, fixed the button on his shoulder strap, stood looking down at him a little longer, and then left the room, closing the door after him.

In the meantime, the ship was already "cleaning house", and in the freshly scrubbed and scoured saloon preparations were underway for what Lionel had predicted. Tins of caviar, bottles of vodka, and boxes of the most expensive cigarettes were being set out on the starched white tablecloth by Auntie Polyá, whose face was red and swollen from weeping. Captain Amirajibi, his freshly shaved cheeks a steely blue, wearing a starched white shirt, and his Gold Star on the lapel of his coat, was slowly pacing the room, smoking, thinking, and humming:

*Please put in a kind word
For this old hussar. . .*

"Auntie Poly, here's your shawl," Volodya said, and feeling that his legs were giving away, sat down on a sofa.

"Pull yourself together, Vladimir Afanasyevich," Amirajibi said to him. "Surely you didn't think war would be like those films in which you don't care who dies? God damn fascism," he said with infinite loathing. "And the whore Hitler. . . They are like hawks, tearing out pieces of living heart from living men. But we must go on and on, we must march along our road while we have strength left in us, and smile if we can, doctor, smile for all we're worth, putting cheer into our crew. Watch me, how well I smile, I've learnt how to do it. . ."

Ustimenko raised his anguished eyes and shuddered. Facing him squarely in the bright light of the shadeless operating-room lamp which they had forgotten to remove from the saloon, stood a perfectly correct gentleman smiling a big smile that seemed to be pasted on to his ashen-bronze, deeply lined face with a smoldering look of hatred in the very black eyes.

"Like it?" Amirajibi asked.

"No," Volodya said, running his tongue over his parched lips. "It's too obvious what you're thinking."

"Oh, that's my own affair," Amirajibi gave his peculiar gurgling laugh. "It has nothing to do with matters of diplomacy."

And turning abruptly away from Volodya, he began to sing very softly again:

*Please put in a kind word
For this old hussar. . .*

Amen

Soon after midday, watching from the captain's bridge, Volodya saw the giant *Catalina* flying boat land on the water in the bay. The thundering noise of the dozens of aircraft flying over Reykjavik made it difficult to hear signals. Then he distinguished the call to attention, and against his will found himself in the saloon where everything now looked like a scene from a play: the masses of goldbraid, the armfuls of cloyingly sweet black roses, the cigarettes, the cigars that looked too long to be real, the bald heads above the braided collars, the sprightly, attentive liaison officers carrying pistols in their belts as if they were at

the front, and the strange woman in unrelieved black with black furs, a chalk-white, narrow face and a stunned, wandering look in her eyes.

"It's his mother," Volodya realised, and clenched his teeth. "His mother."

The stout uniformed man on whose arm she was leaning said something to one of the liaison officers, who then clicked his heels and turned to Amirajibi. They talked in an undertone, Amirajibi indicated Volodya with his eyes and suddenly their glances met.

"It can't be helped," Volodya read in his eyes. "It's very hard, it's almost unbearable, but we must go on and on and do what our conscience bids us. You know all that yourself, don't you, doctor?"

It was indeed unbearably hard, but he had to go. He went to the hotel in Kirkustraite, and a small, ginger-headed roguish bellboy in a red and gold uniform took him to Lady Neville's suite. A worried and highly dignified gentleman, who was probably the secretary, warned the Russian doctor that Lady Neville was not quite well. The doctor would understand, he hoped. . . . In view of everything. . . .

"I do understand," Volodya reassured him.

An elderly butler, or whatever he was, a highly dignified gentleman too, opened another door into a room in which, as in the other rooms, the curtains had been drawn across the windows to shut out the light. And here, in the gloom, sat a woman in a drooping, cringing attitude, a rug tucked round her legs—the tall old lady with the stunned, wandering look in her eyes.

"It's his mother, Lionel's mother," Volodya thought with anguish and despair. "She has no reason now to drag on the burden of life. She is the mother of all of them—the mother of dead sons."

She did not speak.

She sat silent and waiting—for what?

Lionel's uncle Torpenthow, the stout uniformed gentleman with a circlet of short, curly grey hair around a bald patch, stood smoking a cigar and waiting, too.

"Lady Neville would like to know everything you can tell her about her son, the late Sir Lionel, whom you. . . ." Torpenthow broke the silence at last.

"Yes, I understand," Volodya said, nodding.

And, looking into the eyes of this old woman, directly, calmly and keenly, so she would understand all he said, he began to speak. He began by telling her about the air battle over the convoy, leaving out none of the details known to him: he told her about Lionel's courage and valour, he told her how everyone on all the battleships and transports watched his brave little fighter in the air, he told her about his bringing down the nazi plane, and then being picked up, wounded, by the *Alexander Pushkin*. Captain Amirajibi, he told her, said that Lionel had the heart of a young lion. At this point the stout uncle grunted, and turned his attention to his cigar which needed re-lighting.

"Yes, yes, I'm listening, doctor, go on," said Lady Neville.

But the stout Torpenthaw did not let him get on with the story. He said something to the old lady in a low voice, rang the bell, and very soon more people came into the dim room— young men in khaki with the letter P on their coats. "P stands for press," Volodya said to himself, and the emotional state he was in when he came here and began to tell about Lionel, was suddenly dispelled, and he felt cold and empty.

"This is the press," said Torpenthaw. "The press. Would you be kind enough, doctor, to repeat all you have just told us about Sir Lionel."

Volodya repeated it. But now he spoke mechanically, wondering how Lionel would have behaved just now at this encounter with his uncle Torpenthaw, the Indian Service general. Lionel's brittle laughter still rang in his ears, when once again he turned to the mother and tried to forget the young men who were so quickly, efficiently and obediently taking down his words...

"Yes, doctor," the old lady said again.

The tall woman who seemed so small and frail to Volodya, was straining forward in her chair, and her grey head was shaking gently, quite close to him. She listened eagerly and avidly, without tears, and had lost the stunned and wandering look. Her expression was joyful and keen, as if nothing except what Volodya had to tell her mattered to her in life. And so he told her all the little things that would be dear to her heart, such as the crew calling her son Lyonya, the music guessing game Lionel had invented for them to play, his trying to give away his supplies to everyone, and his making friends in the hospital with a Russian flyer who had said he was one of the best.

"We are very grateful to you for telling us these details," Torpenthaw interrupted suddenly in a commanding and some-

what hostile tone. "But we should like to hear a little more about Sir Lionel's last days. You were with him, and it's more than likely that you heard him speak his mind on certain subjects, a matter of particular importance to us just now..."

Volodya did not speak at once.

He seemed to see Lionel again, he seemed to see the smile touching his lips—hating and unforgiving. Once again he saw the face of a suffering little girl who wanted to be taken for a boy, and he asked himself for the hundredth time—was it just physical suffering?

The khaki-clad reporters stood perfectly still, fountain pens poised over their notebooks. They were waiting.

What would Lionel have said to them if he had not been killed by their traditional policy? What words would that newly born man have found for the press?

And again he glanced at Lionel's mother.

She, too, was waiting.

And one of Lionel's murderers who had signed his death warrant in that telegram—his uncle Torpenthow who had too much in common with the nazis to want their defeat—was also waiting.

Finally, Ustimenko began to speak, unhurriedly, and taking the greatest care to make his English clear and to the point. He had to render Lionel's words with the utmost accuracy, remembering his peculiar style, impatient and blunt, and his pet, rather boyish turns of speech. And now Volodya was repeating the words after Lionel, copying his intonations, and even as he listened to the sound of his own voice he seemed to see the rolling waves again, the foaming crests, and feel the steady movement of the ship.

He spoke about the blood shed by the Russians and measured in thousands of litres, about Lionel's brother John crushed into the desert sand by German tanks; about Harold, the eldest brother, the intelligence officer who hated Munich and was murdered in Hamburg with the aid of Mosley's men. The fact that he knew these particulars was proof of their authenticity. With a cold heart and clear mind, reserving his own opinion, he merely repeated what Lionel, who was incapable of lying, had known for facts. And now, Volodya got to the most painful subject—that of the Arctic convoys, and here he began to speak more slowly and carefully, still addressing Torpenthow alone and never once looking at Lionel's mother. The explosives, guns,

planes and tanks, lying at the bottom of the icy oceans meant thousands of bereaved mothers, widows and orphans. Let the reporters know the attitude of all the world's Torpenthows to this.

He was not betraying Lionel, he merely did what he had to do in memory of Lionel. And when the huge, stout Torpenthow interrupted him with a most politely worded remark that the late Sir Lionel had always been prone to exaggeration, and that the boy's exaggerations were undoubtedly being magnified further by the Communist views of "our very good doctor", Volodya had his answer ready.

"I did not expect you to believe me, or even to wish to believe me," he said in a calm, quiet voice. "But actually it doesn't matter at all. I merely told you what Sir Lionel couldn't tell you himself, although you wouldn't have believed him either, from what I gather, though knowing perfectly well that he was right. But that's not the point at issue. What is very important for us is that at times of the most severe trials people like the late Lieutenant Neville prove to be our true friends—in life, in battle and in death. . . ."

And, bowing to Lady Neville, he walked out.

* * *

"We must go on and on," Volodya told himself as he strode in the rain to the harbour. "There's nothing to be done about it—we must go on and on."

The Icelanders shied away from him. He was talking aloud to himself, and he had a hard, hot gleam in his eyes.

A small blue car overtook him almost at the harbour. It braked abruptly, and the next instant Volodya was confronted by someone breathing a mixture of cigar smoke and whisky into his face. He recognised one of the reporters who had been taking down his story about Lionel.

"I'd like a few words with you, doctor," the man said, pulling his raincoat out of the car.

"I've no time," Volodya said with a weary sigh.

"There's an excellent bar not far away."

"It's pointless, and you know it," Volodya said. "All of you think and reason like that man Torpenthow."

The reporter's horsey, toothy face had raindrops trickling down it.

"That's going too far," he said. "It's putting it too strongly. In this war we're doing a common job."

"In our manual we have a paragraph which you'd better memorise otherwise you won't be able to understand. I'll try to translate it for you from memory..." After some thought Volodya quoted: "'Worthy of blame is not the soldier who in his endeavour to destroy the enemy has failed to attain his aim, but the soldier who, afraid of being answerable for his actions, remained inactive and failed at the right moment to make use of all his strength and means to attain victory.'"

The reporter did not speak.

"Did you get it?" Volodya asked.

"It's too much like politics."

"It applies to everything," Volodya said with angry emphasis.

"To Lionel Neville's death as well, if you want to know. Think it over in your spare time, that is, if Torpenthow lets you."

Walking round the reporter as if he were a telegraph pole, Ustimenko continued on his way to the harbour. When he got back to the ship he was shaking so violently that Auntie Polya, without being asked, brought him a glass of vodka to calm him.

"And in the meantime no one is even thinking of loading us," Petrokovsky said, coming into the saloon. "Do you know why? Because they think we have to rest after the voyage. No one has ever shown such tender concern for our nervous systems as our dear allies are doing. These people are crazy with kindness...."

"I hope they burst with it!" said Auntie Polya. "There's hardly any vodka left, what with the visiting from early morning. And they don't want caviar sandwiches, they want to eat it out of the tins with spoons."

"Don't let them," Petrokovsky advised her. "Make the sandwiches yourself, little ones...."

"Try and not let them with the Captain we have!"

The following evening, the *Catalina* took on board the zinc coffin with Lionel's body, which was to be placed in the family tomb he had told Volodya about. Meanwhile, the officers of the Royal Navy who came with the convoy were drinking vodka and eating caviar in the saloon of the *Alexander Pushkin*. A senior officer made a speech about the unparalleled courage of the Allied Soviet Army and Navy. Captain Amirajibi sat with half-closed eyes, and his ashen-bronze face seemed dead except for the twitching of one eyelid.

"Death to the German invaders!" he said in English and raised his glass. And it was precisely at that moment that Petrokovsky came in with Lady Neville. Her eyes sought Volodya and found him at once. The old lady had come there alone. Her raincoat was wet. And her wet face looked even whiter than the day before.

"I don't know," she said, looking about her perplexedly at the officers who had risen to their feet at her entrance. "I don't know . . . I came here to. . ."

She even tried to smile, and in this smile Volodya suddenly glimpsed Lionel—the same proud and suffering expression.

"You'll feel better for a little whisky, Lady Neville," Amirajibi said to her gently. "You're tired and cold, that's all. . ."

Volodya came towards her and she gave him a quick glance.

"I know I didn't thank you yesterday, doctor," she said in her brittle, puzzled voice. "I didn't understand, yesterday. But then later, at night, I did. It was Lionel speaking, of course: it was, it was my little boy, Lionel. He . . . he never lied."

Anxiously and helplessly she began to rummage in the pockets of her raincoat.

"Your medicine?" Volodya asked.

"No! Not medicine," she said, her face crossed by a twinge of pain.

She unfolded a piece of wet note paper, took out a photograph and held it out to Volodya. The photograph was also wet and very shiny, and perhaps because a drop of rain had fallen on Lionel's face it looked alive, and the propeller of the plane in the background seemed to have just stopped revolving. They were standing in the rain, it seemed, the boy and the plane waiting for the sky to clear up.

"There!" Lady Neville said, pressing Volodya's fingers to the picture as if to tell him it was his to keep. "A prayer, and I will go. There is nothing more that I can do."

She remained silent for a minute as though trying to remember, then she raised her bloodless face to glance once more at Volodya, at Captain Amirajibi and the others, and, standing there in front of the table with the caviar and vodka on it, the ashtrays and cigarettes, the bottles of fruit juice and siphons of soda water, she said the old mariners' prayer, dryly, clearly and dispassionately:

"Preserve us from the dangers of the sea, and from the violence of the enemy; that we may be a safeguard unto our most

gracious Sovereign, and a security for such as pass on the seas upon their lawful occasions; that the inhabitants of our Island may in peace and quietness serve thee our God; and that we may return in safety to enjoy the blessings of the land, with the fruits of our labours, and with a thankful remembrance of thy mercies to praise and glorify thy holy Name; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."

"Amen," said the officers of the Royal Navy.

"Amen," said the senior officer in a thin voice.

Captain Amirajibi and Volodya took Lady Neville to the gangway. It was raining hard in Reykjavik that night. Below, on the wharf, stood a black Cadillac with the motor running.

"They've come looking for me already," she said with her strange half-smile. "But I'm perfectly sane, you know."

At ten that night the *Catalina* soared up from the water with her powerful engines roaring, made a farewell circle over the port, and set course for London.

* * *

So that's how it had been—the birth and death of a man.

With time those bitter days grew more and more remote, except for one strange thing: although gradually he completely forgot much of it, the picture of a little girl, a suffering little girl who so wanted to look like a brave boy, never dimmed for him.

And he had no one to tell about it, to describe what he felt. he could only tell Varya, and she was not there, Varya was not there!

There Is a Hospital Near Kiev

The Commander was in conference with British admirals and commanding officers of the convoy with which the *Alexander Pushkin* had made the return journey. People kept coming in and out and every time the heavy door opened those waiting in the outer office could hear the excited voices of the allies and the brusque replies of the Commander. Silence would be restored when the aide—a complacent-looking young man in a very short service coat—rose and closed the door with a dutiful and diligent look. Then all that could be heard was the whistling of the wind in the hills and the delicate rustling of paper as the aide leafed busily through his files.

The clock had struck two when the allies came out. Volodya noticed that the face of the shorter of the two was an angry purple, and he strode to the door with downcast eyes. The Captain who followed him—a somewhat stooped, blue-eyed old man, evidently caring little that the Russians might understand, said loudly and very distinctly in a furious voice: "I curse the day I joined the Navy!"

The other Englishmen turned to look at him, but he merely dismissed their clucking with a wave, and vanished down the corridor. A small lamp went on on the aide's table, and Volodya went into the Commander's room. Clouds of bluish grey smoke floated in the air. A waitress was collecting the tea things and the uneaten sandwiches. The Commander was trying to open the window. He was still scowling, and his fingers tore futilely at the window latch.

"Take a seat, Major," he said, sitting down on the low windowsill, having finally undone the latch. "Come here by the window, it's suffocating in here after our friendly chat. Sit down. Had a good rest?"

He spoke quickly, obviously still keyed up as a result of the conference. His face was burning and his eyes glittered wrathfully. Ustimenko made his report, the Admiral nodded, and again told him to sit down. For a time he sat gazing out of the window at the bay saying nothing, but gradually the deep vertical lines between his brows disappeared and his eyes assumed their characteristic expression of caustic humour.

"I say, doctor, is it long since you read Gogol's *Enchanted Spot*?"

"Quite a long time, Comrade Commander."

"There's a hapless old character in it who's out looking for buried treasure," the Commander said, smiling into Volodya's eyes. "Well, in order to find the treasure, he had to reach a place from which he could see both the priest's dove-cote and the clerk's threshing floor at the same time. But the poor old chap just couldn't manage it. It was no use, because there'd either be the dove-cote on view and no sign of the threshing floor, or if he could see the threshing floor the dove-cote would be out of sight. Well, it was exactly the same thing with them," he jerked his chin in the direction taken by the allies. "The same thing exactly! To bring the convoys through they want us to open a route for them from which they can see both the dove-cote and the threshing floor at the same time. But there's

a war on and it can't be managed. I told them this parable, but they didn't appreciate it, they became more ruffled still, damn it all. . . ."

His eyes no longer twinkling, he lit a cigarette and stared into the distance, at the brilliant green-blue, sunlit water of the bay.

"Sorry. I simply mentioned it by the way," he said. "I invited you here to thank you for your report. It will be extremely useful, Comrade Major, you did a good job. And your evaluation of the situation is politically correct as well. What an amazing thing politics is! Now you, a doctor, wrote a report on burns and overcooling, but look at it! Its sweep takes your breath away! I'm sure our 'friend' Churchill and our other 'pals' from their Admiralty would have given a lot for this report never to have been written at all. The figures! You can't laugh *them* off. Thank you again, but now there's something else I want you to do for me. Just one more thing. And after that I'll let you go back to surgery, especially in view of Kharlamov's insistence, he wants you there, you're his rightful heir, he says. . . ."

Volodya went crimson, even now he was able to blush like a youngster, and the Commander, noticing it, smiled.

"It's quite all right, Major, chin up! It's flattering enough to be praised by Kharlamov, but when this praise is seconded by Levin in his croaking screams, and further supported by Mordvinov, our incorrigible skeptic, then you know it's got to be reckoned with. And now, to come back to my request. . . ."

"Yes, Comrade Commander?"

"I want you to go to the Rybny airfield right away, straight from here. Have you ever been there?"

"Yes, I have."

"Find Colonel Kopyuk. Remember the name? Kopyuk. He'll be expecting you. A transport plane will fly the two of you to Belaya Zemlya. It won't take long. Maybe they have cases of frostbite there. If so, they must be evacuated. And then again the situation there generally wants sizing up. You know what I mean. Kopyuk, his name is Pavel Ivanovich, will tell you the particulars. Consult Mordvinov on purely medical questions. Well, that's all. . . ."

He got up and shook Volodya's hand. "Good luck," he said.

"Thank you, sir."

"How did you get on with Amirajibi?" he asked, taking Volodya to the door of his office. "What did you think of him?"

"He's a wonderful person!" Volodya replied in a full, happy voice. He actually stopped to repeat: "He's a wonderful person, the best."

The Admiral also stopped, and looked at Volodya intently.

"That's good," he said with a shade of severity. "It's good that you have it in you to rejoice when you meet someone real. There are people, you know, who don't feel any such gladness. But then they simply shriek with delight when they see something bad or dirty. I'll never understand that. . . ."

Mordvinov could give Volodya no further particulars. All he knew was that distress signals had come in from an American transport ship the *Jessie Johnson* from somewhere near the ice rim in the region of Zubovskaya Bay on Belaya Zemlya, but just what the trouble was no one could tell.

"Why, the *Jessie Johnson* was in our convoy!" Volodya exclaimed. "I remember the name very well, we were berthed next to her and were loaded at the same time."

The famous pilot Colonel Kopyuk, a heavily built, superbly self-possessed man, had nothing definite to tell Volodya either. He refused to let him take an assistant or any trained nurses along for fear that the plane might be overloaded on the return flight.

Permission to take off was not given until evening. Volodya drank weak tea, ate rusks, and listened to Kopyuk quarrelling with the weather men. A little later, the navigator—a tall and angry young man, and later the aerial engineer, the "old man" as he was respectfully called, came to his aid. It now transpired that the second pilot had suddenly fallen ill and there was no one to take his place.

"He's been eating toadstools," Kopyuk said, laughing. "I swear it's a fact. Saw him myself. This morning, as I came out of the dugout, he said to me: 'Look—mushrooms!' And I told him he'd better throw them away. But no, he went and fried them. And now, of all things, he wants to know if a person *has* to die of mushroom poisoning or if cases of recovery have been known?"

Volodya heard the pilots and the weather men laughing, then suddenly the aerial engineer, who had a short, stocky cast-iron sort of body, shouted to him: "Come on, let's go!" and there, at the plane, Kopyuk politely asked Volodya to take the seat of the co-pilot.

"Done any flying before?" Kopyuk asked.

"I have," Volodya replied.

He was dying for some sleep. For the last four days and nights he had been working on his report and had hoped to go home after handing it in to the Commander. Instead he had been ordered to Belaya Zemlya or somewhere. In the meantime, the famous Colonel Kopyuk, who was in a talkative mood, was telling him exactly how to take off.

"Feel it? I'll give it more gas. When taxiing into position before take-off, you control her by applying the brake on the right and the left wheel and, of course, by changing the number of revolutions now on the right, now on the left. And now, here we are at the take-off. . . ."

Volodya sighed.

"Now we test our motors, with the brakes on. They're working smoothly, you can hear that yourself, no coughing or spluttering or anything, and now we let her go, see? Now, now, now. She's straining to break free and soar up. We shall now raise the tail, check it with the horizon, see what the control instruments say, and take off. For the take-off we use our sixth sense. . . ."

"Help!" Volodya thought. "I'm not going to get a minute's sleep."

The famous pilot talked and talked, without pausing for breath.

"Listen," Volodya said after about an hour of it. "I'm terribly sorry, Comrade Colonel, but I want to sleep. I can't. . . ."

Kopyuk roared with laughter.

When he told the others that the Surgeon Major wanted to sleep, they also began to guffaw uncontrollably. The "old man" had to brush away a tear and moaned and shook with laughter. At last they told Volodya what the joke was. Kopyuk's crew had been going short of sleep for several days, and it was because he wanted someone fresh to keep him awake that he had made Volodya sit next to him. And he was the one begging off!

"All right," Kopyuk said when he had laughed his fill. "Let's talk about medicine, maybe that will keep you awake."

Volodya sighed sadly. He knew only too well what was coming when someone volunteered to talk about medicine. As a rule it ran something like this: "There's the case of my mother-in-law: the doctors tried everything and couldn't cure her, so she went to see a homeopath and got well at once! One chap they cut open and sewed him up leaving a pair of scissors inside. My aunt, the doctors said, had cancer, they cut her open and found

no cancer there at all, now why do they say such things? I know a pilot whose parachute didn't open, but he landed with no bones broken—how do you explain that?"

But Kopyuk did not say anything of the kind.

He asked with unexpected harshness: "Why is it so bad in the hospitals, doctor?"

"How do you mean—bad?"

"I mean it's bad in all the hospitals," Kopyuk said loudly, his hands on the controls. "I'll tell you about my own experience. I was wounded and had to have an operation, this was back in 1942, we were on the Black Sea then. It was my head. I got hit in the air, worse luck. And with my own ears I heard what the surgeon said, a good surgeon, a specialist, of course. This is what he said: 'The only medicine our friend needs now is complete quiet.'"

An expression that was almost malignant flitted across the pilot's big, strong, open face.

"So they gave me quiet! And this, mind you, was in a base hospital in the rear, a good hospital. Can you imagine? Take the night, for instance. You'd just doze off, and dozing did not come easily to us, you know, when suddenly you'd wake up with a jolt—someone was calling the nurse. But she wouldn't come. We were all of us weak, we weren't allowed to get up, not supposed to. But anyway we couldn't even if we had wanted to. And so he'd start banging on the bedside table with something. Of course, everyone would wake up. No peace. No chance of peace and quiet. You'd drop off again, and the next thing you knew they'd be at their morning routine: sticking thermometers at you, mopping the floor, shoving the chairs about with a clatter. After that, of course, come the injections. I was dying, doctor. And I would have died if my sister hadn't taken me home with her. She lives there, in Novosibirsk, and she took me to her place, after signing a dozen receipts for me. And can you beat it, I got well in a fortnight. Only because I had peace and quiet. . . ."

Ustimenko glanced irritably at Kopyuk every now and again as he listened. He kept silent, sighed, and thought what very many doctors think in such cases: peace and quiet is all very well, of course. But supposing the patient has perforating ulcers? Or volvulus? Or can you cure a necrotic intestinal loop with peace and quiet, Comrade Colonel? Or say there's a patient suffering from cardiac insufficiency. Would he recover completely

at your sister's place if treated with peace and quiet and nothing more?

"And d'you know something else, doctor? People tell me that in the Ukraine, near Kiev there's a small hospital. . . ."

Volodya yawned into his fist and turned away. A golden cloud came sailing towards the plane. Far below the ocean slowly rolled in cold, endlessly long, dark waves.

"Yes, I'm listening, a hospital. . . ."

But Kopyuk said no more. He was not one of those men who can glibly tell a story to empty air. The times he had tried to tell someone about that village hospital! The times he had begun to tell generals of the Medical Corps and ordinary doctors, both military and civilian! But no one had ever heard him out yet. Kopyuk had read in the fleet newspaper about Ustimenko removing the unexploded shell from the sailor's shoulder and now that he had seen him he decided that here was someone who would understand, would hear him out, and make a note of it. But no, even he had not listened to the end. . . .

He had simply lost interest in the small hospital near Kiev.

He lost interest without hearing him out.

Colonel Kopyuk could not know that one day this conversation would come back to Ustimenko, and come back with a vengeance. He was to recall it much later, when he was in trouble, when disaster, befalling him unexpectedly, stupidly and crazily, made a mess of his career and his future, which today looked so bright and secure.

Naturally, none of this could have occurred to Kopyuk.

Darting a baleful look at the slumbering surgeon, he began to whistle a tune. He whistled softly, to regain his composure. How hard it was, he was thinking disgustedly, for anything new and worthwhile to break through the mesh of routine and indifference, and make itself heard above the loud, empty talk of professional speech-makers!

"Health protection, kind doctors, kind nurses. But I bet that if it's some big shot he gets put into a ward by himself, and I'd like to see someone making a racket there! Quiet is essential there. No one would kick a chair across the room. No one would dream of waking him up just to stick a thermometer at him. A big shot's sleep must not be disturbed, they know that all right. But when you try to tell them that a hospital like that has been opened near Kiev for ordinary people, for collective

farmers, no one's interested. Listening about it makes them yawn and puts them to sleep. You just wait, comrade doctors, I happen to be a deputy to the Supreme Soviet of the U.S.S.R. I'll have you know, and I'll have my say in the debates one day about your hard and fast rules! Just as soon as we've done with the fighting and have squashed the Führer once and for all we'll go back to problems of peaceful construction again, and then I'll show you."

Reflecting in this manner, Colonel Kopyuk prepared to land his heavy aircraft. It was a tricky business, landing on Belaya Zemlya, the more so now that he had to make it as close as possible to the *Jessie Johnson* which he sighted on his second circle and on which there were no signs of life that he could see. This was very queer—surely, they couldn't have all died in the last five days? No one could have killed them here, surely?

The roar of the engines woke up Volodya and he too looked, but he was unable to make anything out. He did not even see the ship until he set foot on her deck, which was covered with hoarfrost and was as silent and empty as everything else there.

He stood with the airmen for a while on the spar deck, straining his hearing for some sound in the dead silence.

"They've removed their gun locks," the aerial engineer suddenly broke the silence. "Can you hear me, Comrade Colonel?"

"Who could have removed them? There've been no Germans here."

The lanky young navigator emerged from the deck superstructure, closed the door on its creaky hinges, and called down to the radio operator: "Hey, Kolya!"

"What have you got there, Andrei?" Kolya called back, hallooing as if they were out mushrooming in the woods near Moscow.

"The cargo's O.K."

"This place gives me the heebie-jeebies," said the engineer. "There's been a tragedy here. A ghastly tragedy, mark my words. . . ."

But there had been no ghastly tragedy. Everything turned out to be amazingly unexciting: the crew had on the master's orders simply abandoned the ship and settled down in tents on the shore. The fat skipper, wearing several blankets on top of his fur coat, shouted long and vehemently, with his dark red cheeks shaking, while Colonel Kopyuk listened, looking like a puzzled child.

"Yes, I was sighted by a German air scout! And I signalled to him that I was surrendering. I belong to the merchant marine, not the Navy. I carry war risk insurance and I get extra Arctic pay for these bloody trips. But I won't get the money if I get killed! We've moved out on shore, and we take no further responsibility for your cargo. I didn't start this war. I've no quarrel with the Germans. I'm an isolationist and a pacifist. I don't want to go where the German submarines are, they'll sink my ship. We are disarmed! Fly me back from here, after all I can afford to go home now, you've got your cargo, the rest is a small matter. . . ."

Ustimenko translated this outburst carefully. Everything seemed unreal—the bearded tipsy sailors, the smell of expensive tobacco, the pipes, the inexpertly put up tents, and the fact that the ship had surrendered to an enemy who was not there. It all seemed as unreal as the setting sun that gave out no warmth, the blankets wrapped so picturesquely round these deserters, their crooked smiles, and the tiny, coughing monkey dressed in a little green suit and a hat with a feather, shivering in the boatswain's arms.

"I can talk only to someone representing the Soviet Government," the skipper suddenly announced. "I have no wish to talk to you!"

Kopyuk, waddling clumsily in his fur boots, walked up to the skipper, undid his short fur-lined coat and showed him the badge of a Supreme Soviet deputy pinned to his navy-blue service coat.

"They'll remain here for the time being and I'll come with you," the skipper said confidently. "O.K.?"

"No, it's not O.K. We'll take only your sick, if you have any, and your wounded, of course."

However, Volodya found no wounded or sick among the *Jessie Johnson* crew.

And then the skipper offered them money.

Colonel Kopyuk declined the offer.

After that he offered them anything they wanted to take from the ship, any amount of it, for their personal needs.

"Let's go to the plane," Kopyuk said.

At the plane, the skipper clutched at Kopyuk's coat. Kopyuk turned round sharply, and his big face trembled with fury. Volodya interpreted his words as he went up the ramp: "Have you no self-respect?"

When they were in the air, Kopyuk said to Volodya as though apologising: "I didn't tell him what I thought of him, he's a foreigner, you know. But I should have."

And then, unexpectedly, he asked: "Shall I finish telling you about that small hospital near Kiev? Or aren't you interested at all? To look at you, you're the right sort, you talked to them in a right enough tone, surely you can't be less interested in your job than I am in mine?"

I Am Tired of Being Without You

"Mm, how you smell of Europe!" Vera said, peering into Volodya's wasted face with happily shining eyes. "It's quite a special smell, isn't it?"

He was still standing on the threshold of his dugout: there was some change there, but he could not tell what.

"You're not angry? I lived here. It won't take me a minute to move my things out."

"Why should I be angry?" he asked indifferently.

And then he saw the envelope on the table—it was addressed in Varya's usual hurried scrawl, with the letters slanting this way and that.

"Oh yes, it's from that Stepanova girl of yours," Vera said, following his gaze. "She kept hoping, poor thing, that you'd come back, she wrote this just before she left. Kozyrev was quite angry with her for holding things up. . . ."

She went on talking, but he no longer heard her. He was reading the letter, and his heart thumped heavily.

"I waited for you so. I waited for you so desperately, Volodya! I still thought you'd come back for that real, third time. But you didn't, you meant to leave me, of course, you jumped off the tram again, you couldn't forgive me my unintentional fault. Oh Volodya, Volodya, I'm so tired of being without you, and you're so tired of being without me. You must try to be simpler, kinder to people. You must learn to understand others and not only yourself, and it's time you did understand at last the difference between the life of mortals and holy saints. . . . But are there any holy saints anyway?"

"I'm no child. When I found myself at the front I had to pay dearly for clinging to this notion that all men were saints. People will always be people, they are different people, and

different people have their own good and their own bad in them, but you still refuse to see it. You recognise only those who are saints from your point of view, crossing out anyone who doesn't measure up to your cruel and not always very fair yardstick.

"And now you have broken off with me too, because again I'm not a saint. But I love you, my everlasting, hateful torturer. You have no one like me, someone who is necessary to you always. I'd understand everything in you, I'd help you to take things more easily, I'd subdue you and stroke you even if you tried to bite, I'd listen to your ravings, I'd ... oh, what's the use of talking about it now. And still I thank you for everything. Not for what you have done for me, I thank you for being what you are, for that main thing which I shall always love in you and which, far from squandering in these years, you have become even stronger in.

"I'll never tell you what I mean, but it is the main thing in every living person, undoubtedly.

"And so, thank you for being you. It was terribly important for me to know just now when I'm so miserable that there are people like you. Good-bye, my most precious person in the world."

"Varya."

"Didn't she get my letter?" Volodya asked Vera who, having rolled up her bedding, was already opening the door to go out.

It was senseless asking: he guessed that his letter had never been delivered to Varya.

"One minute," Vera said. "I'll come back and tell you everything."

He poured himself a cup of tea and drank it thirstily. Then he read over the part about the saints. On the whole it wasn't fair, or rather not quite fair. What about the two old ladies? And Tsvetkov? But none of this mattered because the fact remained that now he had lost Varya for ever. And there was no one to blame for it but himself!

"Here's your letter," Vera said, coming back and throwing the envelope on the table. "It came after she left."

"Are you quite sure it was after?"

"It's not my business to deliver mail," she said with a challenge. "I saw it was your writing, that's all. Naturally I could have re-addressed your letter to Lieutenant-Colonel Kozyrev,

who certainly knows where Stepanova is. He took her away himself, but you'd hardly thank me for it. . . ."

Volodya remained silent.

She pulled out her worn suitcase from under the bed, opened it, and, kneeling in front of it gracefully, began to pack her things—there was something pink and flimsy and strangely unsoldierlike. A whiff of perfume came to him suddenly.

"Don't be so annoyed," she said. "No one was using the place anyway. And I was so sick of Nora's guitar, the whispering of the dear nurses, and the whole of that precious community of ours. It was so lovely to read in peace here, and indulge in the joys of individualism. After all, a person must have some privacy."

"But I didn't say anything," he said dully.

Someone knocked. It was Mityashin, bearing a pot of fresh tea, a loaf of bread wrapped in a tea towel, and the officer's supplementary ration of biscuits, butter and tinned food. He also brought two bottles of vodka—a gift which had arrived in Volodya's absence.

Young Yelena skipped about him gleefully as he went down to his underground hospital; Captain Shapiro, with his sweet, vague smile, brought some papers for him to sign; Nora reported breathlessly that for the second time now their request for more pantopon had been refused; the phone on the shelf buzzed, and soon the familiar "disorderly order" of the war, the routine of its everyday absorbed Ustimenko's entire attention once again, and he did not get back to his dugout in the cliff until late at night. He was tired and hungry, but he had regained his composure, and it did not surprise him in the least to see the meal set out on the table, and Vera—tall slender and amazingly beautiful—welcoming him with a warm, caressing look.

"What's the occasion?" he asked, hanging his white coat on a nail beside the door.

"The party? To celebrate your homecoming."

"I believe you've had a drink already?"

"Of course. I care, if you don't, that you've come back, and I think it's very nice of you to come back for my birthday. . . ."

"Is it your birthday today?"

"It will be in twenty minutes from now."

"Let's invite more people then!"

"No," Vera said, looking deeply into his eyes. "No. It's my birthday, not yours, you know. Isn't it?"

He sat down and reached for a cigarette.

"Only do forget your fears," she said. "People are talking about us anyway, and they'll go on talking. And Shura will go on weeping into her pillow, and Nora carrying your picture inside her bra. There's no helping it. . . ."

Her eyes sparkled and her lips twitched with the laughter she was controlling.

"Do you know what you are?"

"No, what?"

"You're a blushing lady-killer! That's exactly what you are! Women wiggle and roll their eyes when they talk about you. And then this independence of yours, remember what our wise old Ashkhen said about it: 'elegant rudeness to the powers that be'. It makes women crazy, you know. To see a man who is not intimidated in the slightest by rank, and who keeps so cool. . . ."

"Oh, all right," Volodya said. "You're making this all up. All this about keeping cool is beside the point. I always said that our manual is the wisest book there is, Vera Nikolayevna. It allows a person to feel he is a citizen with rights while observing the strictest rules of subordination.

He poured out the vodka and helped himself to some cod out of a tin.

"But you look miserable and wretched just the same," she said suddenly very softly. "A poor, unkempt orphan. You know, the wolf cub kind. You want someone to take care of you, someone to groom you and iron out the creases. Look, don't bristle from the very start, no one's going to encroach on your moral independence."

She fell silent, and then asked: "Is it difficult in those convoys?"

"No, not very."

They touched glasses across the table, looking tensely into each other's eyes. Vera drank, shook her small head with the piled up hair, laughed, and quickly poured herself another glass.

"I'm going to get drunk tonight. And please don't judge me too severely, my stern Volodya."

"Supposing she really does love me? What then?" he thought calmly.

"You don't want to tell me anything," she said sadly. "I know, you're keeping it for your Varya. She's a sweet thing, of course, she's guileless and open-hearted. As teenagers you had a romantic attachment and all the rest of it, but as a rule these boy

and girl affairs don't come to anything. Unless it's those too early marriages which are doomed to failure anyway. But never mind that, it doesn't matter, it's something else I wanted to tell you. . . ."

Throwing her head back, laughing with her dark, deep, glittering eyes, and curving her lips in a cruel smile, she said:

"I won't let her have you! It's not that she doesn't want you, all those Kozyrevs and people don't mean a thing, even though I could, of course, easily play up the Kozyrev angle and thus raise my own chances tremendously, but I'm purposely not doing it because you're a clever man and you know what I'm thinking. It is true what I'm telling you—Kozyrev doesn't matter, he's just her bad luck. But I won't let anyone have you. And the reason why I won't let anyone have you is that you're incomparably more important and necessary to me than to all of them. Do you know why?"

"Why?" Volodya asked, a little frightened.

"Because I know, I've been watching you, and so I know what you may become. And you are becoming that before my very eyes. With my help too, because even though you take no notice of it I'm always telling you, at the right and the wrong moments, that you're a phenomenon. Do you understand? A person has to believe that he's a phenomenon and then everyone else will believe it too. I read something like that somewhere. And I shall compel you to be a phenomenon, kick all you like. I'll make you climb to the very top, to the dizziest heights. And when you get there I'll tell you, standing up there on the summit in the wind, I'll tell you that I am part of you, part of your future, part of your genius, your glory, your—how shall I put it? How shall I speak of that moment when you will be opening a congress of surgeons somewhere in post-war Paris, or London, or Lisbon. . . ."

"Oho!" Volodya said, laughing, but he frowned all at once, remembering Torpenthov, Ward and the death of a newly born man. "You do want to haul me to dizzy heights."

"Don't joke about it!" she cut him short. "I am not much of a doctor, do you think I don't know it? I'm no sort of doctor, but I have brains, I'm a woman, and I'm the right wife for someone like you. Without me you'll come to nothing," she said cruelly. "They'll break you, finish you, and leave you no pieces to collect. Stupid, ignorant, career-making nonentities and all kinds of time-serving idiots will get you to write their books for

them with grateful acknowledgements in the foreword or maybe even in a footnote, and you'll do it in the name of humanism and also because you're completely and stupidly devoid of vanity. That's what will happen to you without me. I know, I've seen enough. But with me you'll come to believe in yourself, because I'll be whispering to you in bed all night long how wonderful you are, and you'll simply have to remember it in the morning for two or three hours at least, do you understand?"

"I do," he said smiling. "But we'd have to get married first to do that, wouldn't we?"

"And you will marry me," she said emphatically. "I'm not proud, I can wait. You know, Volodya darling, only fools stand on their pride in love. And small-minded women. Oh, she'd sooner die than sacrifice her silly pride! If her pride comes first it means she doesn't love him. It means she doesn't care two hoots for him, that's what it means. . . . There was a time when I, too, was proud. . . ."

She drank another glass of vodka, flushed a deep, warm red, and grinned.

"With all those colonels and lieutenant-colonels! There was one pilot, oh how timid he was, and then how beastly, and then how tearful! And it was the same with a certain general. There was a professor at our institute, and I was only a kid then. A gold-mine of knowledge he was, a genuine scholar. . . ."

Her shining eyes seemed to look through Volodya at something in the distance, visible to her alone. Suddenly she gave her head a toss, shaking it so hard that one of her glossy, dark-auburn plaits got loose and slid down her back.

"You know the most important thing about you?" she asked, stretching languidly. "It's your moral independence. None of them had it, none of my would-be lovers. They didn't lack it entirely perhaps, but it only went so far and no further. Oh God, what am I saying to you, it sounds like flattery, but it's what I really think about you, and you've got to know it all. Drink to me, please, if only once, after all this is my birthday!"

He reached across the table for her glass. She bent forward quickly, gripped his wrist, and holding it in her warm palms pressed her lips to his hand.

"Don't!" he cried in embarrassment. "Stop it, stop it, Vera Nikolayevna, please, Vera, you mustn't carry on this way!"

"Say it again, say 'Vera,'" she begged through tears that suddenly filled her eyes. "Is it too much to ask? Or does it sound too

much like Varya? Is it your scruples? Don't let your scruples worry you, I'm sure Kozyrev has no scruples when he's with her. . . ."

He jerked his hand away, but she did not release it.

"It's stupid," he said. "And despicable."

"No. It's like begging alms on a church porch. I told you I wasn't proud."

He heard the tears she was holding back, but none of it meant anything to him. Her "I'm sure Kozyrev has no scruples when he's with her" still echoed bitterly and hurtfully in his heart.

And suddenly, as though brought back to him on a piercing gust of wind, there was that autumn morning of his sweet, long past youth again, the shaking branches of the rowan-tree outside the open window, and his first awareness of tenderness for Varya, of a need to protect her. He remembered her broad palm between his lips, her girlish body, their embrace, and her mocking words about their getting married: "In your spare time, Volodya dear?"

"The most precious person in the world to me". He suddenly remembered, with seething, insupportable anger. "Kozyrev's fire-bird! Thank you for being what you are! And what about herself?"

Pulling his hand free roughly, he got up, poured and drank a glass of vodka, lit a cigarette, and with an effort at easy familiarity in a voice that was still strained said: "Your health, Vera. . . . We don't do badly together, do we? Drinking and eating, and this and that. . . ."

"It's not me you're saying this to," Vera said with a short, mirthless laugh, reading his thoughts shrewdly. "It has nothing to do with me. You're settling a score with your Varya Stepanova. Only please don't imagine that I'm making a scene. It's all right, I'll help you in this too, I'll help you in everything, I'll even help you to get over it. I'm strong, and once I take something on I don't give up. And I have already taken you on. I belong to you, you know, dear Comrade Major, I'm yours till death do us part. Never mind that it's hard on me, never mind that I suffer such torments of jealousy that I have to open and read all your mail. I steam the envelopes first and then raise the flap with a knife, I have an old scalpel I keep specially for the purpose. It doesn't matter, all's fair in love, the important thing is. . . ."

Twining her plait round her hand she gave it a hard tug, got to her feet, and coming close to Volodya repeated: "The important thing is—do I suit you?"

She looked earnestly into his eyes.

"You do," he said roughly. "You do perfectly."

He was a bit light-headed from the vodka and from Vera's nearness.

"Then tell me to stay!" she said imperiously, hardly parting her lips to speak.

"Stay."

"It doesn't matter that you don't love me," she said, her lips still clenched. "It's of no importance at all. With time you will come to love me, I know, I am sure. You will love me because I shall become a part of you."

Placing her hands on his shoulders, she drew him gently to her until her lips almost touched his.

"And, please, say something more or less affectionate. It's not so very difficult. Just to be polite, and I'll try to believe you mean it. Call me darling or dear or something. It will be my birthday present from you. . . ."

"Darling," he whispered piteously, and suddenly remembering with a painful stab of vengeful anger all that which was now finished for ever, added: "Vera."

Trembling, she clung to him.

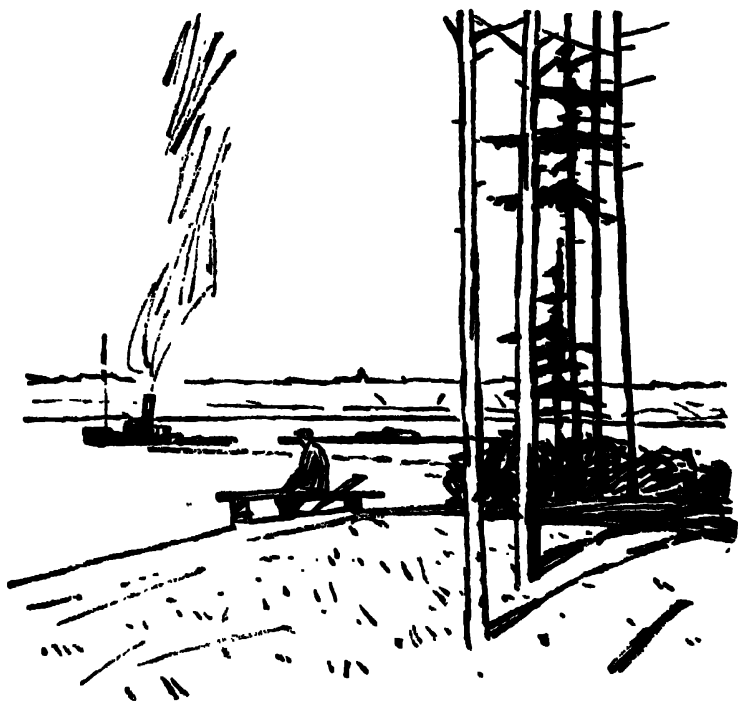
"Vera dear, Vera dear," he repeated rapidly, eagerly.

"You see?" she whispered into his ear. "See how generous you are? It was dear of you, thank you."

In the morning Nora Yartseva congratulated him without looking into his eyes.

"On what?"

"On finding personal happiness," she said through her tears.



Chapter 12

Your Turn Now

"I'm wounded," he thought. "How stupid."

He managed to drag the boatswain who was probably already dead a little closer to the ramp, then he heard the ringing drawn-out moan of a gun salvo—the destroyer was firing her main armament—after that he saw the black planes with the swastika coming into attack again, and only then, dropping his face on the singed boot of the dead sailor, did Volodya faint.

He came to in the dining saloon of the *Svetly* which had been converted into an operating theatre. The ships were still firing,

covering the landing troops, and the air rang and shook with the salvos. Suddenly Volodya saw Rodion Stepanov, whose elbow the ship's doctor was bandaging quickly and expertly.

The yellow, blinding light of the shadeless lamp hurt Volodya's eyes. He squinted and called Rodion in what he thought was a very loud voice, but no one heard him. The effort took all the strength he had, and again he felt he was being dragged under, down to those dark, suffocating depths where he remained until he saw himself in the low, vaulted basement of some strange hospital. It was not a strange hospital, really, he knew it very well, only he had never had to see its ceiling before, the way the wounded see it, lying on a cot.

For several days or maybe many days he lived in a mysterious world of obscure sounds and a wavering white mist. He left this world sometimes and then returned to it again. There may have been an operation, but he could not be sure. There were moments when he fancied he saw Kharlamov, the Fleet Surgeon, and heard his sharp, authoritative tenor voice, and then he recognised Vera. There were tears in her eyes, but they did not spill over.

"Darling, how do you feel?" she asked tensely.

"Lousy," he told her, losing consciousness again.

And the hours, days and nights sped blindly on again, until he heard a tired, hollow voice say somewhere close: "I am afraid we're losing him."

"I was taught," Volodya said, gasping weakly for breath and barely able to move his thick tongue. "In my time... I was taught... that even... in the worst cases... a doctor should be discreet..."

The room grew still, and then someone said in a deep, respectful voice: "Talk of strong characters!"

He asked for water.

Vera—warm and rosy from sleep, with her white kerchief slipping—bent over him with the feeding-cup.

"Where was I wounded?" he demanded sternly.

"It's only a flesh wound, darling..."

"Don't lie to me," he told her. And when he had rested, asked: "Are my hands..."

Her lips twitched with compassion and pity.

He closed his eyes, as if he were falling asleep. The boot was on the other foot now. It was one thing to treat the wounded, and quite another to be that wounded yourself.

The days and nights raced on again. But even when he got much better he could not talk to anyone. He did not ask Kharlamov to tell him anything, for didn't he know how beautifully the man could lie for the good of his patients?

"It's useful, actually," Volodya said aloud one day, in Kharlamov's presence, answering his own thoughts. .

"What is?" Kharlamov asked.

"I mean experiencing some of these things is useful for us, doctors. Such things as suffering, for instance. I was in great pain, I asked for morphine, but they wouldn't give me an injection for the very noble reason that I might become an addict. Before this happened, I myself would have refused, but now. . . ."

"Hm. How you do like to go to extremes, Vladimir Afanasyevich," he said. "But there really have been cases. . . . However, we'll argue this out when you're well again."

Chief Medical Officer Mordvinov, wearing his general's uniform, announced to Lieutenant-Colonel Ustimenko that he had been awarded the Order of the Red Banner. Volodya was about to answer the way he used to when receiving other orders: "I serve the Soviet Union", but he was afraid that he had served his usefulness and it would sound presumptuous, so he merely thanked him. The medal was handed to Vera, because Volodya's hands were useless.

On the following morning, Vera read him an article in the fleet's newspaper describing his bravery. There was a headline: "Stand from under, Fritzes, the Sailors Stand Firm Here!" Volodya saw a picture of himself in the middle of the page—a natty young doctor with the wide-eyed expression of a good little boy. Vera's reading was stirring, the room was hushed, and all the patients listened to the story of Lieutenant-Colonel Ustimenko's heroic action: he performed operations during the fighting, braved gunfire to drag the wounded Able Seaman Shalygin to safety, and then took a dead gunner's place at the machine gun. . . .

"Tripe," Volodya said. "I never took anyone's place at any machine-gun, I don't know how to fire one anyway."

"What's the difference? This is a sketch, you know," Vera said testily.

"That's no reason to tell lies!"

Vera sighed resignedly, and he knew she was thinking what a difficult person he was. And he told himself: "Don't be such a killjoy, Ustimenko."

For several days after the article appeared he had to suffer a continuous and utterly exasperating stream of visitors who came to comfort him and buck him up. They quoted cases similar to his which all had happy endings and jolly sequels. They appealed to his will power, courage and optimism, which, they said, were the main things. The only visitor who did not comfort him was the good and wise Amirajibi. This celebrated Captain looked such a suspiciously gay bird with his bronze tan, his light-grey civilian suit, bright necktie, tan shoes, and the handkerchief in his breast pocket, that he had a lot of trouble gaining admission to the hospital at all.

"I look like a spy, I suppose," he said, sitting down beside Volodya's bed. "I've been cursed with this lingering boyishness in my manner, and when on shore I'm never treated like a really grown-up person, if you know what I mean. But you have this curse on you too, I have observed."

And, instead of asking Volodya the customary questions, putting on a visiting-the-sick expression or trying to be sympathetic, he told him some amusing stories about his travels abroad, about his mixing with people in the highest of high society to persuade them to get his ship loaded quickly. He imitated the talk and the mannerisms of various titled persons, caricatured himself and the supercargo so sharply, wittily and comically, that everyone in that sad room was roused, roared with laughter, begged for more, and refused to let the legendary Captain go. Amirajibi stayed till late, and at parting he said unexpectedly to Volodya:

"After the war I'll get a decent tub and I'll ask you to come as my ship's doctor. We'll go on round-the-world voyages and I'll show you the oceans and the seas, you'll see the Atlantic and the Mediterranean, and various other puddles. We'll lie back in our deck chairs—Amirajibi, a doddering skipper who won a little fame in the war, and you, a young and still handsome doctor, slightly battle-scarred. Your hair will have turned grey on the temples, and you'll get yourself a pair of white flannel trousers—all so marvellously becoming. We'll relax in our deck chairs, and I'll show you some rather beautiful spots, after all there are things worth seeing in this mad world, you know. Agree?"

"And how!" Volodya said gladly.

"You must also remember that in all those various countries one must know how to wear one's hat. It's important. And you've

got what to wear it on, the hat I mean. After a war like this one, it's quite an accomplishment, not given to everyone. . . ."

He left, but the men in the ward chewed over his stories for a long time, and remembering, laughed.

At last Volodya was put on board a hospital train. Vera pressed her warm lips, that were wet with tears, to his freshly shaved, gaunt, dry cheek, and the train began its slow journey past the war-wrecked tragedy of burnt and gutted homes, and then on and on, into faraway Siberia. He lay with his eyes closed for the better part of that long journey. The war years had been so exhausting, he was so unbearably tired, so tired also of his constant brooding on his future place in life, that he meant to give himself a complete rest in order to save up his strength for the struggle he would eventually have to fight for himself. And, after all, what was his disability, even if it was to be complete, compared to the price paid for the now so clearly visible Victory. . . .

Ah, the quiet!

How much he appreciated now this blessed quiet, the silence of the clear, warm autumn sky, the fragrance of the pinewoods pouring into the open windows. Where and when had he known this peace before? Was it a memory of childhood, perhaps?

The train surgeon—a soft-spoken old man who shared a pleasant compartment for two with his wife who was as dutifully soft-spoken, stayed talking to Volodya for hours at a time, speaking with cleverness and tact of the joys of a simple life—say, fishing, collecting things, or contemplating the sunset on the Volga. He addressed not only Ustimenko but the whole car, and though the patients listened without interrupting, they smiled and winked at one another meaningfully. "Every man to his job. You do the job you're hired for. His job, for instance, is to comfort," these bitter and sometimes even malicious smiles seemed to say.

"But your hands are there," the doctor once said to Volodya alone. "They haven't been amputated, and that's something, you know."

"Of course, it's something," Volodya replied with a cool half-smile.

Yes, his hands were there, but it was only in the evacuation hospital at Starodolsk, a remote Siberian town, that he understood everything, or so he thought, and even then not right away.

It was a long wait before the famous specialist, one of those undimmed names in surgery that could not but inspire awe, arrived at last. Volodya, too, felt awed. When the academician, arriving by plane from Moscow with his staff, walked into the room and paused in the doorway with the sunlight full on his face, the proud, intelligent and strong face of a Roman patrician, he was so overcome that he got to his feet and stood leaning on his crutch.

"Sit down," the academician ordered him in a strong, rumbling voice. "I'm not a general here, I'm a surgeon."

"I stood up in deference to the surgeon and not the general," Volodya said, staring steadily into the Roman patrician's yellow cat's eyes.

"Do you know me?"

"As a doctor I have not the right not to know of your work."

"But why are you in such a temper?"

Volodya remained glumly silent.

Around him the hospital's men and women doctors were dashing about in a flurry of excitement, speaking in choked whispers to the academician's staff, fetching case notes and results of laboratory tests, including those that were essential in his case and those that were entirely unnecessary but made compulsory by existing orders, rules and circulars. Volodya's papers were brought in as well. He glanced at them from the tail of his eye and grinned because they mentioned everything about him except that he was a surgeon.

"Well then, what is the cause of your annoyance?" the specialist asked him.

"I'm tired, I suppose. . . ."

"You'll be able to rest now."

"I hope so."

He now regarded the perfectly shaved, strong, aristocratic face of the famous surgeon with unconcealed malice. I'd like to see you enjoying a rest like this!

"As a matter of fact I, too, am a surgeon," Volodya said with restraint. "And the idea of a rest . . . is not a prospect that appeals to me particularly."

The academician glanced at Volodya with his yellow cat's eyes that were piercing and not at all old, reflected for a moment, called one of the staff sharply, rummaged through Volodya's papers, and when at last Kharlamov's telegram was found and brought to him, said "thank you" with such chilling irony

that Volodya shuddered, envisaging the subsequent conversation he would have with the culprit responsible for mislaying a telegram from the Navy.

It was a grim morning when the specialist pronounced his verdict. Volodya was sentenced without right of appeal. He thought it wiser and kinder to tell Volodya the truth, and he also had the courage not to put off these sad truths too long.

"So there's no hope?"

"I have neither the intention nor the right to console you," the specialist said, peering at Volodya with cold eyes. "However, I cannot but remind you that besides your and my profession there are other things of considerable interest in the world. . . ."

He proceeded to enumerate them, bending his fingers, first on his left and then on his right hand.

"Neuropathology, one. Microbiology, two. Pathological anatomy, three. By the way, I know a neurosurgeon who had the same sort of bad luck as you, and do you know he trained very hard in the use of his left hand and is now able to make a spinal puncture with it, and your left hand, you know, is all right, comparatively speaking. To go on—there's roentgenology, not a bad subject to specialise in and highly promising, one that calls for gifted men. . . ."

Ustimenko stared into space and hardly listened.

"I understand your state of mind, of course, my colleague, but I simply feel I must tell you a story apropos," the specialist continued. "You might take note of it. One of our best-known surgeons, an old acquaintance and I can even say friend of mine, lost his eyesight shortly before the war. . . . Reinberg is the man's name. And can you imagine, this man, this great man I should say, considered it his moral duty, when the war broke out, to attend all the operations performed in his former clinic, and though he could not operate himself, he could and did help enormously with his great experience and genius by merely offering advice in difficult cases. And to this day, my old friend spends hours in the operating theatre, and the surgeons feel secure with him, a blind man, there. Can you understand that?"

"It's all very touching, needless to say, and it must naturally give me heart," Volodya said with a hard, uncompromising look into the specialist's eyes. "But the pain, Comrade General, the unbearable pain must also be taken into account. I only read about neuroma before, but I know what it really is now. Reminds me of that fable about the ant and the grasshopper. . . ."

"What is it you want then?" the specialist asked, and taking a thick cigarette from his case tapped it on the gold monogram on the lid. "What can I do for you?"

"I must have my right hand amputated."

The specialist inhaled deeply, waved the smoke away with his white hand, and said thoughtfully: "I see. We'll go over the whole question again thoroughly. We'll think about it, put our heads together, and talk it over with you again. . . ."

And then one evening a telegram came for Ustimenko. It said, "Meet Moscow passenger plane Friday eleventh without fail."

"Vera?" he thought, annoyed and apprehensive. "But why the formal wording?"

On Friday the eleventh, Volodya was helped into his clothes and taken to the airfield in the battered old car which the doctors used about town.

"Who the devil am I meeting?" he wondered.

The plane was old and shabby, but the pilot landed it so beautifully it might have been the latest in aircraft. The ramp was also wheeled up to the machine as elegantly and swiftly as if this was the Vnukovo airfield in Moscow and not the little used landing strip in remote Starodolsk.

The door opened, and a general stepped out. Volodya knew at once that this was no general, this was dear old Ashkhen Oganyan in person, wearing her dress uniform with all her orders and medals, gleaming silver epaulettes, a cap set rakishly on her head, with the grey hair dressed in curls which were not really curls but rather queerly pinned up loops that fluttered in the autumn breeze. . . .

She carried her raincoat and an old field bag, and since she had no luggage to collect, she got into the car and crisply ordered the driver to take them to a restaurant, a good one, the best they had, like those in Moscow. Then she turned to Volodya and her hairy upper lip curled up in a smile, revealing her strong, white teeth that showed no sign of age.

"Volodya, dear, I bet when you saw me you thought: here's our old witch flying in on her broomstick! Right?"

"No," Volodya said. "But I did think it was some general at first."

"You mean a male and not an old bitch?"

"Goodness, why?"

"I've become terribly coarse. It's our dear Zina who's so sweetly feminine," Ashkhen said. "And do you know something, Vol-

odya pet? I'm going to paint this town of yours red today, like a tough soldier on furlough. Is this the restaurant? Do they have vodka?"

She glanced at her watch, adjusted her pince-nez, told the driver to call back at 14:00 sharp, and heaved herself clumsily out of the car.

The Breeze was a newly opened restaurant. Flinging her cap, raincoat and bag to the startled cloak-room attendant, Ashkhen told the waitress to call the manager, and marched to the best table between the rubber plant, the potted palm and the window.

"Are you the manager?"

The bald-headed man in horn-rimmed glasses who looked like a preacher inclined his head.

"Bring us the best you've got," Ashkhen told him. "The cognac is to be Armenian, of course. It's all on me, and damn the expense, I'll smear the waiters' faces with mustard and smash your pier glass. Do you have a good, expensive pier glass?"

"We'll provide one for a good customer," the manager said, smiling blandly. "We'll provide everything."

"Is there a band?"

"It's too early yet, madam."

"I'm not a madam. We gave all the madams their marching orders in my young days, sent them west, if that's clearer to you. I am a general. And see that the champagne is properly iced."

The manager backed away. Ashkhen offered Volodya one of her Herzegovina-Flor cigarettes and lit one herself.

"If I were a man, Volodya dear, I'd give the most hilarious drinking parties. And I'd be a menace to the girls, too."

And then she turned serious, and studied his face narrowly.

"Oh, I see. We're completely absorbed in ourselves, are we? We're not even interested in the Sovinformburo communiques? We can't bestir ourselves to answer letters, although two old women keep writing and writing, we've become so ill-mannered, we're so busy nursing our sufferings that we can't even bother to dictate a couple of words. We're special, aren't we?"

"If you invited me here to..." Volodya began to say, but Ashkhen banged the table so hard to silence him that the old waiter, who was setting out the glasses, jumped.

"Be quiet and listen to me," Ashkhen said, glaring at him with her protruding eyes. "And be very quiet, or else I'll get really angry, I'm angry enough as it is, but if I get still angrier you'll

regret it, Lieutenant-Colonel. Pour out the brandy," she shouted at the waiter. "Can't you see this is a poor war invalid and if he doesn't drown his sorrows in drink soon he'll start using bad language and insulting the passers-by. Hurry up and pour him a glass, and bow to the ground before him, you owe him an apology because your hands and feet are whole. . . ."

Volodya gave a long sigh. After all, it was a long time since he had been bullied by Ashkhen, and he had forgotten that she always took drastic measures.

"Drink my health," she told him. "I'm an old witch, so drink to me, and listen. . . ."

Volodya drank, and as he did so noticed her keen look at his fingers.

"Don't worry, I can hold a glass," he said with a crooked smile.

"But I'm not worrying. Now listen: in the summer of 1932, it was proposed to Oppel, who was gravely ill at the time, that his cancerous eye should be removed. He thought it over for several days, then he went to his clinic, blindfolded his bad eye, and operated as usual. Only after he had made quite sure that it was possible to operate with one eye, did he agree to the operation on himself. The right to remain a surgeon meant more than life itself to him."

"Quite right, too," Volodya said. "Have I said anything to the contrary? If you meant to give me an object lesson you might have cited a happier instance. . . ."

His eyes were spiteful and mocking, his thick long eyelashes trembled.

"It was precisely in those days that Oppel wrote those famous words of his, you know," Ashkhen continued less confidently.

"What words?"

"Haven't you ever heard of them?" she asked helplessly.

"No."

He asked the waiter to fill his glass and drained it. Ashkhen started at him, appalled.

"Why, you're a drunkard!" she gasped.

"Not at all. I'm an alcoholic," Volodya teased her. "Well, where are those famous words?"

Ashkhen got her wallet out of her inside breast pocket, rustled through the contents, and then placed before her on the table a narrow slip of paper covered with Zina's minute, clear handwriting.

"A crib prepared specially for me," he said. "I can easily imagine how much time was wasted on writing it out, the number of books poor Zina had to leaf through first, the squabbles you two had! Have you found the place?"

"I have."

"Shall we proceed?"

"You're tipsy, Volodya dear," the old lady said, reproachfully shaking her head with the elaborate hair-do. "You're tight, that's what you are."

"I'm drunk as a lord, I'm blotto, I'm blind," he said to give her a fright.

"Eat some butter quickly. And salmon! Why don't you eat the salmon? Waiter, please bring us something swimming in fat, the Lieutenant-Colonel is already getting drunk. . . ."

"I'm joking," Volodya said, smiling. "I was pulling your leg. It's just that I'm very fond of you and glad beyond measure to see you. . . ."

The old lady blew her nose thunderously, and averted her face slightly.

"Don't give me that. I know you too well. Listen now."

Setting the pince-nez crookedly on her nose, she read the words out with feeling.

"Oppel, the famous surgeon, wrote: 'Real, genuine surgeons usually look for difficulties in order to overcome them. I believe I have the right to range myself with the surgeons who look for difficulties in order to overcome them.' Do you understand that?"

"Perfectly. Only it has nothing to do with me. Please try to remember that. This neuroma is killing me. I no longer sleep like a normal person. I'm losing my head from the pain and everything connected with it. I want my hand amputated, but they refuse to do it. My surgeon's days are over, but they won't take the responsibility, damn it. And I can't do it myself. I haven't the courage. And I imagine it would be rather difficult to do. Talk to them, will you?"

"All right," Ashkhen said thoughtfully, sipping her champagne. "I'll talk to them. But we are not going to amputate your hand. You'll get over the neuroma. No, no, don't fly into a rage, Volodya dear, I know what neuroma is. You'll get over it in time, I repeat, but you'll never get over the loss of your profession."

"I've lost it already," he said with a passion of despair in his low voice. "I'm not a child, Ashkhen Ovanosovna, I'm a surgeon, an experienced one."

"No, you are a child, and I have more experience than you.

"But you don't know anything about my case!"

"True, I haven't examined your hands, but I had the X-rays and everything else I needed, sent to me in Moscow. Today, I'm going to look at your hands."

That evening, she examined his poor, ugly hands long and carefully. His breath was sour with stale alcohol. He was pale, excited and cross. Ashkhen remained deep in thought, breathing noisily through her nose, and saying not a word.

"Well?" he prompted her.

"I'll tell you the truth, Volodya dear. The unalloyed truth. You've had two operations so far and the condition of your hands has, naturally, improved. You'll have to have two more operations at the very least, you know it yourself. But it does not rest with surgery. The main thing is you!"

"I thank you!" Volodya bowed with mock courtesy. "Will power, fortitude and faith in the ultimate triumph of reason over oneself! Tell me another! I used to be able to deliver those little speeches myself. I've had enough. Good night, Ashkhen Ovanesovna, it's been a sort of trying day."

"Good night, Volodya dear," she answered in a deep, sad voice.

The next day he saw her off at the airfield. She asked him if he would like to come to Moscow, to one of the hospitals for treatment, but he said no. The old plane made a dignified take-off, and disappeared out of sight, but Volodya did not go back to his room for a long time, and spent the better part of that sultry autumn day in the garden. He spent the next day and evening sitting there too, and so it went on, day after day, evening after evening: he sat on a bench, brooding, and listening to the band playing in the park on the river bank. It reminded him of his youth, and the band playing in the park where Polunin died.

He had the use of two fingers of his left hand. He pulled out the slim cigarettes from a torn packet and chain-smoked them, knitting his bushy brows and staring stonily into the darkening depths of the old garden. The gloom of the approaching night was already gathering there. But the band went on playing, exactly as it had done on those long-ago nights when everything had still been in the future, when Volodya Ustimenko, his aunt's "darling giraffe", had dreamed of becoming a real surgeon, when his wild imagination had devised for him operations that were

unthinkable even now, when breathless with excitement he had easily leapt over centuries, leaving modern surgery far behind him and whispering furiously about his great contemporaries: "Retrogrades! Pillmongers! Quacks! Figureheads in surgery!"

Come on then, Dr. Ustimenko, a surgeon with war experience, a doctor living in the very centre of modern medical science, the sole authentic revolutionary in medicine, why don't you mend your hand? You can't. No suggestions even? And yet how easily you produced words of consolation for your patients, how glibly you advised them to be reasonable and take up other new trades, how annoyed you were with those of them who refused to eat or talk, who shut themselves in and withdrew from what is known as the collective.

Whiners, he used to call them, those men who had lost the most important thing of all—their life's work.

Sometimes the local doctors tried to make conversation with him, the bearlike, pot-bellied and bow-legged Nikolai Fyodorovich, the tall and scraggy Antonova, the old and mocking Zakoldayev, and the very young Maria Pavlovna. Probably for fear of causing him unnecessary pain, they all pretended to forget that he was a doctor, and talked to him about anything under the sun except the work without which life to him was not worth living. While they chatted about all sorts of things he remained glumly silent, raising his thick eyelashes from time to time to give the speaker a sharp, sullen look, impatient for him to be done.

'They all preached what he used to preach once.

What he was supposed to practise now.

Why don't you, Lieutenant-Colonel Ustimenko? The wise, gifted, promising surgeon, upright, uncompromising, highly principled and exacting to the point of pedantism. The ex-surgeon rather, and now a patient in hospital for treatment. Why don't you?

Two Pills for a Good Night's Sleep, Fifty for a Quiet Death

He was about to go indoors when Major Malevich, his roommate, a card fiend and a hard drinker, came and sat down heavily on the bench beside him.

"You here, Lieutenant-Colonel?"

"Yes."

"Still brooding?"

"What else is there to do?"

"There isn't much else, it's true."

Volodya said no more.

"I've got some booze," the Major said, still panting from the effort of walking. "These blasted local witches fairly bleed you white for their brew, but what can one do? Would you like to go shares?"

"Sure."

"It's cash down."

"The money's in my room."

"Good. Shall we?"

Why not? Why not take a drink when he had a chance? He must also learn to play preference now—it was another way of killing time.

"I've got an onion, and some nice fresh bread," Malevich was saying in a deep, soothing voice. "And a tumbler too. In fact, I've got all the sorrow-drowning equipment right here."

By the glimmer of his cigarette lighter he poured the raw alcohol into the glass, diluted it with water which he had a bottle of, broke off a piece of bread and gave Volodya a small onion.

"Here, here's your drink."

Holding a tumbler with his two good fingers was much harder than holding a cigarette, and so Malevich more or less poured the fiery liquid that smelt of kerosene into Volodya's mouth. He drank next, and after that measured out the remains, making a drink for each of them.

"Feeling better?" he asked.

"I believe I am."

"That's the way to do it," Malevich said with a sigh. "Crying for mother won't help."

They stayed a little longer, smoking, and then Malevich said he had to hurry "home" to supper. When the sound of his heavy steps died away, the band playing in the park seemed louder, and listening to the slow, peaceful melody of an old waltz Volodya thought of suicide for the first time, quite seriously and even matter-of-factly. It was such a simple way out.

Why should a person, deprived of his life's work, deprived of his purpose in life, of all that happiness meant, have to drag it out? Why kill time playing cards and drinking, why trouble

others with the process of his slow extinction? It was not life. Extinction was the right word. Why should he?

How simple, how sublimely simple and clear the whole thing appeared now that he had made this discovery. . . .

The tedious cycle of days and nights dragged on again, the next exactly like the last, with their preference games, chess, small binges on the quiet, and Vera's letters. He sent her postcards in reply. The sister or the ward nurse would sigh and take down his dictation: "I'm taking treatment, my mood is normal, regards to the staff, kisses."

He could not say anything more.

To Ashkhen's and Zina's letter he replied cheerfully: "I'm feeling better, I'm in fighting spirits, the hospital is excellent, nursing is first-rate, I've no complaints or requests." He did not answer Kharlamov or Rodion Stepanov, who was in bed with cardiac failure. Those two would overwhelm him with their sympathy and understanding if he wrote them not in his own hand, and what was the use?

Why trouble people who were ill and no longer young with the process of his extinction? What was the sense in that?

Late one dreary evening, after the endless autumn rains had begun, he came out of his first-floor ward into the corridor, and sat down in the night nurse's armchair with the broken springs.

The decision taken on that stuffy night in the garden had become firmer, and he was merely waiting for a chance to carry it out. And now, sitting in the armchair, he began to think of the end as he always did when left by himself, his unwavering gaze fixed stubbornly on the white medicine chest with the red cross on the door. He had no qualms, no fears, not even about leaving Vera. "She's too decent to desert me now, and the future with me hardly promises her much fun." Reasoning in this way, he stared blankly at the medicine chest when suddenly he realised that the key was sticking out of the lock. Nurse Raya, a wildly cheerful girl with bright red cheeks and black eyes, had been on day duty, and it was she, of course, who had forgotten to lock the chest.

Without getting up from his chair, he stretched out his hand and opened the little door. Here, as elsewhere in all other hospitals, everything was kept in the order established once and for all time. He knew the order well and so he did not have to search long. There was the bottle on the second shelf on the left: two pills for a good night's sleep, fifty for a quiet death. Rather

sleep that passed into death. And to make sure that Raya didn't get into trouble, he would pour the pills into his pocket and put the bottle back in place. They kept no count of the pills, he knew. . . .

He carried out his plan with a morbid gladness, and leaning heavily on his crutch went back to the ward where Khatnyuk, a tankman suffering from burns, and Kartsev, a naval lieutenant, were playing dominoes and carrying on a desultory conversation.

"If only I could get them to go and play in the corridor!" Volodya thought irritably, and lay down. The glass of water stood ready on his bedside table, but he couldn't start swallowing the pills with those two there, because they'd be sure to ask what he was doing, why he was taking so many. "Maybe I could put this business off till later in the night?" he wondered. And smiled faintly, realising that he was looking for an excuse for postponing his intention and doing it honourably. . . .

Hanging up his robe with care so the pills wouldn't fall out of the pocket, he got into bed and fell asleep at once, sleeping as soundly as he had done in his youth after a hard day. He awoke when day was breaking, the darkness in the room was already thinning out, and there was someone standing at the foot of his bed, a frail, white, drooping figure. . . .

"Who is it?" he whispered.

"It's I, Maria Pavlovna," the young doctor answered in a very soft, almost inaudible whisper.

"Maria Pavlovna?"

"Yes. Could you come outside. . . with me?" she asked, coming a little closer. "For a few minutes . . . That is, of course, if you feel well enough."

"She saw me pinching those pills and got the wind up," Volodya thought resentfully. "She was the doctor on duty, after all. Or maybe it was Raya who saw me."

"Give me my robe then," he told her.

He disliked this doctor, but then he disliked many other people here. The local men and women doctors had done nothing to deserve it, but he was convinced that he knew more than they would ever learn and therefore thought he had the right to look down on them with mockery, dislike and even contempt.

"White-coated heroes!" he thought irritably, walking with care so the heel of his crutch shouldn't slip on the tiled floor. "Rescuers of men! What the devil does this dreary virgin want anyway?"

The light grey eyes of the small, thin woman appeared

infinitely tired, she really looked faint. Glancing up quickly and nervously into the sullen face of her invariably bad-tempered patient, she asked again: "Could you come to the duty room with me if it's not too much for you?"

No, obviously it wasn't the pills. What was it then? His morale, perhaps? Or had the curtness of his letters made Ashkhen kick up a fuss and so this girl thought she should give him an edifying talk and explain to him just what were the main traits of character of the ideal Soviet man?

Let her try!

Just let her dare!

He'd make her sorry for it.

Her bed, made up on the oilcloth-covered couch, had not been slept in. But, of course, she was the type who wouldn't sleep, her whole life was one long feat! Oh no, she wouldn't sleep, although taking a nap would have been quite in order. But how could she, she was ministering to suffering mankind!

"Well?" he said, sitting down and leaning the crutch against his chair. "I'm listening."

"You see, doctor," the mousy little woman began, blushing and suddenly looking pretty, with a youthful, immature kind of prettiness. "I'd like to tell you, doctor. . . ."

"I'm a raven, not a miller," he quoted morosely. "A doctor, indeed. . . ."

"Yes, you are a doctor," she said, mastering her shyness and speaking rather emphatically. "I need your advice, I want to consult you. The thing is that I've heard about you from Dr. Oganyan, and then, you see, we also received a letter. And this particular case. . . ."

He looked at her small hands with the short fingers and carefully trimmed nails as she got some X-rays out of their envelopes and placed them before him. There were many X-rays, very clear ones, intelligently and expertly taken. They had an excellent man at this hospital. Slowly and carefully Volodya studied one of them, then a second, and then a third, and drew a difficult breath. He broke into a sweat, it was so unexpected and frightening. . . .

They were exactly like those X-rays he had looked at in Dr. Ward's small office, back there in the Arctic hospital on the hill. This was exactly how Lionel Neville had been wounded, that dear boy, a recollection of whom was still capable of wringing his heart unbearably. Yes, that's where the bullet was

lodged, at the very base of the lung. Yes, everything was exactly the same, so what now? What did this painfully blushing female want of him?

She talked, and he listened, glancing through the X-rays. Obviously, this kind of lung surgery was known to her only through literature; it was nothing to be ashamed of; she was very young, if he wasn't mistaken? Oh, she had graduated four years ago just before the war broke out? Oh well, for a surgeon four years of war mean all of twenty peacetime. Just what could he do for her? She realised, he supposed, that his hands were useless at the moment. Or did she imagine, as many other doctors did, that he could still do something useful with the two good fingers he had? If so, she was gravely mistaken, he hastened to assure her. . . .

"No, it's something else I wanted to speak to you about," she said gently. "I need, or rather all of us here, need your advice. You see, Colonel Oganyan has been telling us, and then we also learnt from the letter I mentioned, that you have operated on lungs. . . ."

"What letter is she talking about?" Volodya wondered, guessing that it was from Vera, and hating her for trying to manage things for him. "Must be some tear-jerking mush about a poor crippled surgeon. . . ."

"You performed a great number of operations at the Navy," she went on.

"In the Navy, my dear woman," he corrected her, well aware of the inanity of his remark, yet persisting for sheer mulishness. "In, not at the Navy."

"In the Navy," she repeated in a small voice. And then, apparently embarrassed by his unrestrained hostility, his tactlessness and his utter lack of effort to control his irritation, she hastened to say: "Well then, to put it briefly, doctor, we have a patient here, a Colonel Sarantsev, these X-rays are his. His present condition gives us no cause for alarm, but we think the calm is not genuine, not real, I mean just temporary. Colonel Sarantsev has suffered a great deal, the condition of his leg is unsatisfactory, and things were rather badly bungled at first by our less experienced doctors. And so, we wanted to ask your advice, seeing that you have worked under Colonel Oganyan and Kharlamov himself, and have personally. . . ."

"I see," Volodya said, looking over Colonel Sarantsev's case notes. "I understand everything."

He wasn't listening to her too attentively as he kept asking himself: was this charity, was it a put-up job to give him something to do, was it the upshot of Ashkhen's flying visit and Vera's sob story? And suddenly he heard the sound of his own voice, he heard his own curt questions about the present case, and forgot his tormenting doubts of a moment ago. He recognised that old voice of his, which he had lost the habit of using. That was how he used to talk to Dr. Shapiro when he offered him detailed but inaccurate explanations about a case they were working on together.

Yes, but was he working now?

Sufficient unto the day. . . . His breakfast and his cocoa were brought to him in the duty room where later he listened with a sullen frown to what the staff had to say at their daily five-minute meeting, after which Maria Pavlovna, blushing a quick bright red again, announced that on behalf of the doctors she had asked Dr. Ustimenko to act as consultant in Colonel Sarantsev's case, which he had kindly consented to do. . . .

"Kindly consented! How stupid!" he thought, and looked about him suspiciously, on the alert for any winks or nods, any signs of this being a conspiracy of charity, a show put on for his benefit.

But, he noticed nothing suspicious. The bearlike Nikolai Fyodorovich was calmly rolling himself a cigarette, Dr. Antonova was writing something in her notebook, and Dr. Zakoldayev was busy clarifying some points of routine to the nurses.

"Well, what about it?" Nikolai Fyodorovich asked Volodya good-naturedly. "Shall we go and take a look at Sarantsev? I've got to warn you, though, it's been a hard strain on his nerves, and he may fly off. . . ."

"Let's go," Volodya said.

That damned crutch slipped twice before he could lean on it comfortably. But no one there seemed to notice the difficulty he was having with it. And now they were walking down the corridor—not a patient and a doctor, but two doctors, chatting leisurely about professional matters and the hospital's pressing needs. . . .

"What scarecrow is this?" Colonel Sarantsev asked in surprise, watching Volodya clumsily lower himself onto the stool beside his bed.

"Lieutenant-Colonel Ustimenko is not a scarecrow, he's a surgeon," Nikolai Fyodorovich said in his grumpy, bearlike growl. "Behave yourself, Sarantsev, don't be rude to people who've come to. . . ."

"I'm not as touchy as all that," Volodya cut him short.

Did he think he couldn't take care of himself! He could answer Sarantsev without any outside help. Or was he so pathetic that people felt moved to stick up for him?

Nikolai Fyodorovich stayed about ten minutes, and then Volodya was left alone with the small, wiry, clean-shaven Colonel Sarantsev, who peered at him with his bright and evil hawk's eyes, as if to size him up and puzzle something out. Volodya remained silent too, blowing cigarette smoke into the open window of the small ward, and watching the thin, dreary rain pouring down as dismally as in those days in the Arctic when the foghorns hooted in the harbour all the time.

"Well?" the Colonel asked at last. "Going to keep quiet forever, doctor?"

"I'm not in any hurry," Volodya told him. "I'm in ward 5, on the same floor as you."

"So you came here to pass the time?"

"We've all got rotten nerves, Sarantsev. It's bloody awful for all of us."

Sarantsev suddenly flew into a temper.

"I've no pain anywhere!" he shouted, his eyes popping angrily. "I demand and insist on being discharged. I'm well. What in hell's name are they being so subtle about? All right, I've got a bullet inside me, so let it stay there since it's not giving me any trouble. Why, people live with bigger chunks of lead than that in their livers. People get bullets stuck in their bones too sometimes, and they not only survive but actually go on fighting, and not badly either, I'll have you know. And these doctors here are just hanging fire. Discussing me in their doggoned Latin, and I'm no more than a sort of pawn. . . ."

"An operation is necessary," Volodya said dryly.

"What operation?"

"The bullet must be removed."

"From my livers, you mean?"

"From your lung."

"Nothing doing," Sarantsev said sullenly. "It's too big a risk. I've learnt something about medicine here, I've heard enough. A fifty-fifty chance is not worth it, doctor."

"If it isn't removed, it's a ninety-five per cent certainty that you'll have a secondary hemorrhage, and it may be so bad, you know, that no one will be able to do anything for you. . . ."

"You're on the level?"

"I am."

"All right, run along and play. I'm going to do some thinking."

The man's eyes haunted Volodya all day. The hawklike expression looked so strange in eyes of that pure blue. And he simply forgot all about his sleeping tablets. Perhaps he shouldn't have told him what a secondary hemorrhage threatened, but Sarantsev was not a timid soul. And had one the right not to tell the patient the truth in such cases? They had concealed the truth from Lionel. . . .

In the late afternoon, when the dusky hours before nightfall drag with such unutterable misery in a hospital, Volodya went to the duty room and again studied the X-rays, read the case notes through once more, thought the matter over carefully, and then, after smoking two cigarettes, lighting the second one from the stub of the first, went to Sarantsev's room. There was a hard glint in his eyes, and determination and energy were stamped on his face.

"What's the answer?" he asked from the doorway.

"The answer is no!" Sarantsev said. "The matter is closed. Go and take a walk, doctor. Consider yourself free for good now."

"That fifty-fifty chance you talked about is a lot of rot. Tripe!" Volodya said, sitting down and putting his crutch within easy reach. "There is some risk, of course, but I'd like to tell you a story and I want you to listen and bear it in mind."

"No sob stuff!" Sarantsev ordered in his high-pitched commander's voice. "I'll listen if it's funny."

"It won't be funny," Volodya warned him.

And he told him all about Lionel Neville. He had never been a good storyteller, his manner was always rather jerky, he did not know how to make a story flow smoothly and how lessen the impact of the shocks, but perhaps in this particular case it was the only way to tell it. . . .

Lionel Neville Again

The rain still rustled monotonously and serenely outside the open window, when Lionel seemed to walk into the small room, and now they were three: Sarantsev, Volodya, and the young Englishman, the boy who had become a man and who understood everything when it was already too late to understand.

The young lieutenant with the curls on his forehead and the firm smile on his boyish lips, the dead English aristocrat, seemed to be speaking through Ustimenko to Sarantsev, a man of peasant stock. "Stop it, Colonel, see what happened to me, see what the precious conservative method does when it means your life or mine. Don't be an idiot, bless your stars that you've no Dr. Ward and no uncle Torpenthew; make for the operating table, and you'll be all right. There's that in your world which you can rely on, it's something I understood too late, but you're fortunate to be living among it always."

And once again Volodya heard the whistling of the Arctic wind on the last night of Lionel's life, once again the British fighters circled over the *Alexander Pushkin*, and he saw himself returning Auntie Poly a her fine woolen shawl.

And only then did Sarantsev speak.

"You think I should?" he asked.

"Definitely."

"If I could see her first," Sarantsev suddenly dropped his voice to a whisper and closed his eyes, ashamed of talking about such things, perhaps. This way it was easier, and he said: "There's a song 'I'm sorry to part with something or other.' I don't know how it goes, but, remember it says: 'the kind sun in heaven and my love on earth.' That's exactly the way it is. I'm a tankman. When it started I wasn't given a minute. I was pulled out of bed, away from her sweet warmth. She wore a bang, and I remember it sticking damply to her forehead. Doctor, you try tearing yourself away from a girl like that for years, for all time. And now my girl with the bang, it's turned grey, writes and tells me to forget all that nonsense. It makes me laugh, honestly, what a laugh! Nonsense, she says. As soon as you've got the bullet out of my livers, I'll make her remember that nonsense, and how!"

Volodya listened, gazing out into the hospital garden, black and rustling in the autumn rain. Lionel Neville had already left them to return to his world of the dead. He had not known about Sarantsev's girl with the bang that had stuck damply to her forehead. Volodya, too, might quite easily have never heard about it, and the long dead Lionel might not have helped Sarantsev, had not Volodya, in the flesh, called in Dr. Ward and uncle Torpenthew in the spirit. Life, he saw, helped life, and nobody had the right to wilfully withdraw from participation in this ever living life.

Back in the duty room he asked Maria Pavlovna about the letter she had mentioned. It was, as he thought, from Vera—short and businesslike. Addressing the local doctors as “dear comrades” she went on to say that Lieutenant-Colonel Ustimenko’s depression, of which she was aware, was undoubtedly caused by his enforced idleness, for he was one of those people who must work if they are to live. Briefly and very efficiently, in a few words, with no exaggerations or embellishments, she enumerated the cases in which he might be of use to the hospital as a consultant. The words “lung surgery” were underscored with a red pencil, as well as her reference to Kharlamov “himself” and to Dr. Oganyan.

“Who underlined this?” Volodya asked.

“Nikolai Fyodorovich did,” Maria Pavlovna replied, startled by Ustimenko’s sharp question. “After speaking to Dr. Oganyan, when they came to an impasse. . . .”

A faint smile touched Volodya’s lips: how this little woman doctor loved fancy expressions like “they came to an impasse”, “at death’s door”. And in a higher key: “the paths of science”, “victory over death”, “the triumph of reason”, and so on.

Suddenly he felt ashamed of himself. After all, he had himself made some extravagant, pathetic utterances in his youth. He remembered saying something of the sort to his Aunt Aglaya one night, at supper. . . .

“Well, what did Sarantsev say?” Maria Pavlovna asked, evidently repeating her question which Volodya, too busy with his memories, failed to hear the first time. “You have spoken to him, haven’t you?”

“Yes, I have. He has agreed to the operation. And if I were Nikolai Fyodorovich I shouldn’t put it off too long.”

In his room, he spent a long time transferring the pills, carefully one by one, from his pocket to an envelope. After taking a couple, as prescribed for a good night’s sleep, he hid the rest out of sight, at the back of his bedside-table drawer. When the time came he’d dissolve the lot in a glass of water and drink it. . . .

But even as he shaped the thought in his mind, he knew already that the time would not come.

* * *

“A Bruin in glasses,” Volodya was struck by the resemblance as he watched Nikolai Fyodorovich washing his hands after the operation. “Funny I never thought of it before. But, of course, I’ve never seen him wearing glasses.”

Maria Pavlovna with a bluish pallor of exhaustion on her face was washing her hands at the other washstand. "She's not a stuffy spinster really," Volodya decided, rebuking himself for his earlier dislike of her. "She's completely worn out, that's all."

He mentioned this to Nikolai Fyodorovich when they were alone.

The surgeon thought for a moment, breathing wheezily, and then said irritably: "She has a universal blood group. And so she squanders it for all she's worth. I can't keep an eye on her, I'm too old, I'm short of breath and sometimes I get such fits of drowsiness, frightful really. She's her own boss, so she does any mad thing that comes into her silly head. . . ."

They were alone in the duty room. The garden looked gloriously golden on this bright, cold autumn day. Yawning from weariness, the bear-like Nikolai Fyodorovich said nostalgically: "The forest must be wonderful on a day like this!"

Ustimenko smiled: just the thing for an old bear like you! He pictured the old doctor in the shape of a big, brown bear from a fairy-tale, walking in the forest, leaning on his stick, relishing the beauty, sharply sensitive to the fleeting fragrances of autumn, pausing on a rise and gazing into the vast distances, at home in his forest kingdom.

"What is it?" the old doctor looked curiously at Volodya. "What's the joke?"

"Oh nothing. . . just pictured the forest, that's all."

"The forest is a good thing. . . ."

"I've never seen you smile," he said with a direct, rather rude stare at Volodya.

And then, looking embarrassed, he pulled the X-rays of Major Khatnyuk's shin closer and turned them this way and that.

"I don't understand a damned thing," he muttered gruffly. "Do you?"

His eyes watched Volodya keenly. The old bear understood everything: there was nothing to understand really. The shin as such interested him but little just then, what did was the light in Ustimenko's eyes. The light had been dimmed, and now it was burning again. Those eyes, framed in thick eyelashes, which had looked so empty, were suddenly full of life again.

"Now what do you think about it?"

Volodya began to speak. After the operation, of which he believed he had been in command, after the success it had proved,

after giving those instructions during the most critical moment of extricating the bullet from what was almost the base of the lung, after the great victory, which Nikolai Fyodorovich afterwards called a two-in-one operation—meaning that it had saved two lives at one go, Sarantsev's and Ustimenko's, immediately after this Volodya's suspicions about there being a conspiracy afoot evaporated. He could not know, of course, that Nikolai Fyodorovich had plenty of experience in lung surgery, that Volodya's instructions coincided with what he himself had been about to do, and that he had merely pretended to be following them because he was fully aware of the importance of that day in the life of his war-crippled colleague. The light now shining in Volodya's eyes, the flush of excitement and the voice of a surgeon, not a patient,—all this was a result of the two-in-one operation, the clever ruse devised by the staff of this remote hospital. The operation had gone well, all they had to do now was to see Volodya safely through the post-operative period. It meant keeping him busy, he had to have no end of work, to be up to his neck in work. . . .

"I see, I see, I see," the old doctor nodded approval. "Yes, I see. . . ."

He nodded and yawned. Listening to Volodya's detailed explanations was dull enough, and after a hard day in the operating room it was sheer boredom.

"I see, I see. Sharp, I think."

This remark confused Volodya for a moment. What was sharp? But, of course, the old man was terribly tired, he wasn't following properly, he wanted to sleep, so he'd really better go to bed.

"I think I will," Bruin said with a sigh. "I will turn in, dammit, but first I'll go and have a bit of cabbage soup. You and Dr. Antonova take charge. Khatnyuk's her patient. And another thing, if it's not asking too much, please take a look at our Sarantsev. He's going to have a bad night, I'm afraid, doctor."

Doctor!

Suddenly, Volodya remembered Chorny Yar, the famous aero-plane-shaped hospital, and the morning Bogoslovsky had called him doctor for the first time. Oh well, in those days everything was so much simpler and easier.

Try and live up to the name now!

The door closed after Nikolai Fyodorovich. Volodya sat down at the desk in the doctor's chair, smoking and thinking. A little

later Dr. Antonova came in to ask his advice about something, and then Dr. Zakoldayev, who was one of the principal conspirators and actually the one who had devised the plot. He gave Dr. Antonova a wink, but she took no notice of it. She had honestly forgotten that they were playing a game, and was having a heated argument with Ustimenko about his indifferent and even slightly ironical attitude to streptocide as a remedy against all ills. Listening to them, Zakoldayev also forgot about their conspiracy, and joined in the argument, siding wholly with Ustimenko and jumping at Antonova for her everlasting irrational enthusiasm over everything new.

Thus, unnoticeably, the conspiracy, having served its purpose, was forgotten by all, the problem had been resolved as Nikolai Fyodorovich put it afterwards.

And so the three doctors argued all evening until it was late.

Having persuaded Dr. Antonova, who was on night duty, to go to bed for an hour, Volodya went to the small room at the end of the corridor to see Sarantsev, who had an experienced, clever nurse looking after him. Volodya found the man's pulse, counted it and agreed with the nurse, that all was going well—Sarantsev's heart was working normally. So would have Lionel's.

Leaning heavily on his crutch, Volodya walked slowly past the table at which the unbelievably red-cheeked Raya was sleeping soundly in her armchair. The key was in the lock of the medicine chest again, as on the night he had stolen the luminal.

"Raya, I say, Raya!" he called, and touched her on the shoulder.

"Eh?" she asked, opening her eyes but still asleep.

"The chest must be kept locked," Volodya told her strictly. "Can you hear me? I know of a case when a certain idiot. . . Look, are you awake or not?"

"The idea! How could I be anything but awake!" Raya said, wetting her lips and shaking her head.

"Well then, I know of a case when a certain idiot stole a bottle of luminal, dissolved the tablets in a glass of water, drank it and went to sleep for ever. The nurse was charged and tried for it."

"Oh, what horrors!" Raya exclaimed. "Just thinking about it gives you the creeps! Imagine, giving a person a scare like this in the middle of the night, the very first time I forgot. . ."

"No, it's not the first time," Volodya said tersely, looking straight into her eyes. "Not the first time, Raya."

He was about to take his two nightly sleeping pills as usual when he got into bed, but thought he'd better not since he would have to go and see Sarantsev later on. He ate some raisins sent as a gift to the hospital, went over Khatnyuk's X-rays in his mind, again pictured old Bruin in glasses strolling in the forest, thought over how best to explain to Dr. Antonova that the frostbite case she had was exceptional and anything but typical, and therefore no conclusions must be drawn from it, but before he could think it out to the end he fell asleep and only woke up when he was called to Sarantsev.

He found him smiling—he looked pale, cheerful and pleased with himself.

"Is it true that the bullet's been removed?" he asked in a whisper.

"It has, and very nicely too," Volodya said, touching Sarantsev's pulse with a finger.

"Are my livers all right?"

"Don't worry, your livers are all right. Only you mustn't talk—God forbid! You want to have quiet now, and then you'll be as good as new."

Sarantsev clamped his mouth shut, grated his teeth, and stared into space with his incredibly blue eyes that still were the eyes of a hawk.

"But my leg will bother me just the same," he said peevishly. "It's heads you win, tails I lose. Some surgery that."

Ustimenko watched him with smiling eyes. Actually, this was living. Never mind, let him grumble at poor surgery, that was still so helpless and incompetent, let him live and grumble. He gave all he had in that battle when they pulled him out of his blown-up, dead tank. Just let him live. He was an engineer, a lame leg would not prevent him from doing his job, he would live, work and grumble. . . .

And the girl with the bang stuck damply to her forehead, to whom he'd be handed back alive, would forget about it too. He would tell her about his "livers", they'd have a laugh about it, and it would never enter her head that her Sarantsev might have easily died of that "liver thing". All they'd remember was that his leg hadn't been fixed properly, and that was a crying shame!

The colonel sighed and looked at Ustimenko.

They remained thus a little longer, exchanging glances—both of them saved by one operation, both of them alive, both still young. . . .

Then Volodya gave him a friendly wink, and started back to his room, but was intercepted halfway by old Bruin.

Putting an arm round Volodya's waist, and leaning close to his ear, the old surgeon said in a low, confidential tone: "Supposing we get busy with your hand right now, Vladimir Afanasyevich? Your right paw, eh? Without putting it off for even an hour. I personally think that since your neuroma has become less acute there's no reason for putting it off any longer. Think of the time it will take you afterwards getting nimbleness back into your fingers, you won't learn to use your hands as freely as before overnight, you know. Now, your left hand is almost all right, but there's the right one."

"Right you are," Volodya said quickly. "Good. I'll only get the barber to tidy me up a bit, everything was sort of upside down yesterday and the day before because of Sarantsev. How does he look to you?"

"Not bad," old Bruin answered, wheezing a little. "Not bad at all. Let us hope that, thanks to your insistence, we have safely pulled him out of a rather nasty hole. Well then, I'll be waiting for you in the second operating room. . . ."

An hour later, Lieutenant-Colonel Ustimenko of the Medical Corps, freshly shaven and smelling of the barbershop, lay down on the table under the light of the huge shadeless lamp, shifted about a bit to make himself comfortable, and then said, looking trustingly into Nikolai Fyodorovich's glasses: "I'm ready."

And closed his eyes.

"I should hope so," Nikolai Fyodorovich thought with satisfaction. "If you only knew, my dear boy, how many consultants are present just now in the spirit, from the Fleet Surgeon to your old Ashkhen, if you knew the tons of paper we used up in letter-writing about you, the countless X-rays carried by mail from this hospital here to Moscow and Leningrad and back! If you only knew all that, Lieutenant-Colonel!"

"Scalpel," he said.

The Wife

On December first, late in the afternoon, Vera walked into Ward 5. Volodya was asleep. His big hands lay tranquilly on the blanket, as though they were resting after a day's work, as in the past.

Malevich and Major Khatnyuk, the two old-timers, paused in their game of draughts and gaped at this strange and very

beautiful woman who, weeping softly, went down on her knees beside Ustimenko's bed and kissed his wrist.

"It's like a film!" said the sentimental Malevich, in an awe-struck whisper. "It does something to you just to watch."

Khatnyuk, the less excitable and more tactful of the two, merely said h-m or something, tugged Malevich, who was devoured by curiosity, towards the door, and finally, by pulling harder when he slowed down, managed to get him outside.

Volodya's eyelashes trembled, and he opened his eyes.

"You?" he asked quietly.

"Yes," she answered, pressing her warm cheek to his hand. "Yes, it's me. And for good! I've been transferred here. Oh, Volodya darling, the anguish, the suffering I went through!"

He smiled patronisingly and coldly: what amazing words the healthy liked to use!

"Please don't laugh," she said. "But you must agree that there are different kinds of suffering. There is purely physical suffering, but then there is pride, you know, injured pride. . . ."

Smiling, he gazed into her delicate face and sought her eyes. She always fell a little short of understanding the main thing, or else she understood only half of what had to be understood fully or not at all. Could it be that all that had befallen him appeared to her no more than so much physical suffering, an illness to overcome?

However, what difference did it make now?

She was here, she had got herself transferred here, she had come to these unimaginable wilds to be with him, she had done it for him. . . .

"Sit down," he said. "It will be more comfortable for you."

"This is comfortable, it's wonderful," she said, pressing her hot cheek to his hand again. "It's amazingly comfortable. And what does it matter whether I'm comfortable or not. I'm here with you!"

The door into the corridor stood open, people looked in, and Vera still kneeling beside the bed embarrassed him.

A faint flush coloured his cheeks, and he told her in a harder tone: "Don't look. I'll put on my robe. Or go outside for a minute."

A little hurt, perhaps, she got up and left the room, and he marvelled at her walk—it was so light and swift. He reached for his robe, struggled into the sleeves, felt with his feet for the slippers, and, leaning on his crutch, got up. By and large, the

procedure was still rather a lengthy one, but the effort compared with a month ago was much less heart-breaking.

"Why, you're doing fine!" Vera said when finally he stood before her in the corridor—strangely tall, she thought him, his soft hair falling over his forehead, his eyes shining with a sadly ironical light from under his thick, long eyelashes. "Really and truly fine!"

"The Lieutenant-Colonel has been doing some great things here," the red-haired Malevich said, joining them. "He heads the board of honour."

"As what?" Vera asked, puzzled. "As a model patient?"

"Why patient? As a doctor! He's treating all of us here. Why, he's. . ."

"Never mind, Major," Volodya cut him short. "Vera, let's go and sit down over there. . . We call it sitting in the shade of the palm trees. . . Come on."

Two wretched, dusty little palms were quietly ending their days in green tubs where the corridor turned. People were allowed to smoke here. Not everyone. Only those who really belonged.

"Is it true that you give treatment?" she asked him when they sat down. Her eyes shone with pride and wonder as if she were looking at, say, an elephant she had trained to perform small miracles. "Is it true?"

"Tripe," he answered irritably. "It's just that people ask my advice sometimes. Quite natural of them."

She seemed unable to tear her passionate, happy gaze from his face. He wanted a cigarette, but he was afraid of starting the tedious routine of getting one out of the packet in front of Vera, and so he resorted to subterfuge and asked her to get him a cigarette from someone in the room, and bring it lighted. She jumped up and hurried away, skating on the tiled floor in long, graceful slides. As he watched her he thought of her belonging to him alone, but the thought made him neither glad nor happy, nor gave him any feeling of contentment. He remarked on the fact to himself, and that's all.

"Everyone's in love with you here," she said, returning with the lighted cigarette. They surrounded me in the ward, and all they could talk about was your husband this and your husband that. And, by the way, I didn't deny it, d'you mind? After all, we are husband and wife, aren't we? Am I your wife, and you my husband?"

An imploring expression flashed across her face, and Volodya hastened to assure her that it was so, it couldn't be otherwise, naturally. . . .

Vera placed her hand on his shoulder and turned to him. Her lips were close to his mouth, he saw her chin, her white throat rising from the tight collar of her naval uniform, he heard her excited breathing, and sensed the warm fragrance of her hair. And whatever there was about her that only a few minutes before had seemed artificial, unpleasant and even irritating, receded into the background before a different feeling—his longing for her, a hunger, desire. . . .

His face trembled, the hard face of a man scorched by the putrid winds of war, and the expression of cool firmness, to which everyone who did not know him very intimately had become accustomed, went from his eyes. And there, in the nook of the hospital corridor with the two little palms that had turned rusty from misery, Vera once more found her awkward, shy Volodya, who had never learned how to really kiss, her lieutenant-colonel, the only one of the kind in the whole world, her greatest of great doctors, who would one day, she never doubted it, open an international congress of surgeons in Paris, that dream city, to a tremendous, unheard of storm of applause. . . .

"Stop it, darling," she said. "Stop it! I came here to work, I'm to be in charge of a department, and here we are necking in the corridor for all to see. . . ."

They didn't know that as soon as they had gone to sit between the two little palms Malevich, an understanding person, had proclaimed the place out of bounds, and had put off lifting the ban until the very last moment when the chief physician, who would not stand for any nonsense, appeared at the foot of the stairs, making his evening round. Malevich sang an aria from *Sylvia* to warn them of the doctor's approach, and only then ventured to bother the "newlyweds" as everyone had begun to call them at once, and ask them to come to supper.

In honour of Ustimenko's wife, supper was served in the duty room, and since no one can be as happy with a comrade's happiness as front-line soldiers who had seen the worst of war, the supper was quite magnificent. Colonel Sarantsev, who considered himself a connoisseur in matters of food, tried especially hard. Believing that it was Ustimenko and none other who had "cleared his livers of bullets" and by so doing had restored him to life, he fried some potatoes on a hot plate the way he alone

knew how, and ceremoniously set down the frying pan in the middle of the table. While Vera was taking a shower, Raya made up a bed on the sofa in the duty room, her red cheeks blushing an even brighter red when she placed the two pillows side by side.

The officers in their blue and rust hospital robes, having taken quick shaves and all but bathed themselves in Carnation, Lilies of the Valley or Violet toilet water, stood in the corridor outside the duty room smoking real Moscow-made Kazbek cigarettes which Vera had brought. They talked quietly, told mildly risqué jokes, laughed and generally behaved in a manner that indicated that though they may be in the back of beyond, far from the front, they were still fellow-officers in spirit, well able to rise to the occasion. . . .

After her shower, Vera changed into civvies, and when she appeared in her light-blue wool dress with a narrow patent-leather belt and small bow at the throat, Volodya's recuperating friends were speechless. They couldn't have been more stunned if a delayed-action bomb, weighing a ton, had suddenly exploded there, in the deep rear.

"Wow!" Malevich gave a gasp of admiration, and then whispered: "I tell you, friends, it's the latest in 1944 fashions. . . ."

"It's copied from a film," Raya observed. "I've seen a queen dressed exactly like that, only she wore it in her private life. . . ."

"But how did you see her in her private life, darling child?" Khatnyuk asked.

The door of the duty room closed after the officers. Sighing and grunting, leaning on sticks, crutches, or perhaps cradling an injured arm, they slowly trudged back to their wards, to prepare for the long, dreary hospital night. Colonel Sarantsev, twitching his shoulders nervously, lay down on his hard cot, drew up the blanket to his chin, and thought that Ustimenko, for one, had lived to sleep with his love again. He shivered and yawned. Raya, concerned more with the style of that "queen's" dress, put out the light in the vestibule. "Patriot, Don't Waste Electricity!" Posters like this were hung all over the premises.

Vera was combing her hair, still damp after the shower, and she had turned on the radio. Volodya watched her in silence. He was thinking that it was she who wrote the letter which helped him to pull through, and that he should feel grateful to her. He supposed it was very bad of him to be so callous, but

he did not feel grateful at all, and the very thought of that letter was unpleasant.

"They're firing a salute in Moscow," she said softly. "Can't you hear?"

"I can hear it."

"And this is like a wedding night for us. . . ."

She gave her head a shake, and her hair cascaded in a dark wave over her shoulder, down to almost the shiny narrow belt.

"Is it or not?"

"Well, I suppose it is. . . ."

"I can even take your 'well' without feeling hurt!" She said with flashing eyes and her teeth gleaming in a challenging smile that became her beautifully. "You can't do without me, and I can't do without you, but I've known it for a long time, and you, my sweet, don't know it yet. But you will, in time. . . ."

He watched her hands as she opened the bottle of champagne, and thought that if she believed in him so strongly she must really care. But the word "if" made the whole thing unreliable, insecure and hazardous. And was it himself that this beautiful, clever, well-dressed woman with the lovely figure loved? Was it the person he knew himself to be, the person Varya knew and understood?

Thinking of Varya was taboo just now, there was something perverse and even blasphemous in it, but he thought of her without willing it, for his will was weak that night. . . .

The cork shot up into the ceiling, and Vera poured the champagne into enamelled hospital mugs.

"Stop thinking about her!" She ordered him calmly. "She has no use for you. Understand? And then you must agree, my sweet, that it isn't very nice of you to think of another woman on our wedding night. It also gives you a bovine expression, not very attractive. . . ."

How could she read his thoughts so accurately?

Have I Capitulated?

Of Rodion Stepanov she told Volodya that he had really had a myocardial infarction, but had come through safely, had later been promoted to Rear-Admiral and decorated with the star of Hero of the Soviet Union—the only commander of a destroyer flotilla in the Navy to receive the honour. Captain Amirajibi

had entertained Vera on board his ship the last time he came in with a convoy. He had a huge new ship now, the kind President Roosevelt called cheap packing for expensive American goods. Captain Shapiro had been made Major, and Dr. Levin was very, very bad, and would probably die soon. Vera had seen Tsvetkov in Moscow, she had to thank him for helping her with the transfer to Starodolsk, him and Kharlamov of course. . . .

"He took me out to dinner, he's such a funny person!" Vera added, after a pause.

"Who, Kharlamov?" Volodya asked, surprised.

"Why Kharlamov? Tsvetkov, of course."

"I've also been to a restaurant here. Ashkhen took me out," Volodya said reminiscently.

Vera gave him a quick glance and turned away.

By eleven next morning, the formalities over, Dr. Vera Vere-sova was presented to Nikolai Fyodorovich. The old Bruin, she afterwards told Volodya in high delight, had been almost startled, and had called her a beautiful lady and a "gift from the front to us in the backwoods". By dinnertime, she had found a two-room flat very close to the hospital, a stone's throw away actually. The owners, she said, were the nicest, and really cultured people, who were delighted to rent the place to doctors. Just before suppertime, Volodya was taken to his new home in the car of some big shot, and a few days later, in the evening, when he was reading an article on cacti in the old Brockhaus and Efron encyclopedia, two girl reporters from *Starodolskaya Pravda* came to see him—both of them bright, modest, young, rather effusive, and very plain.

"But who is it you want to interview?" Ustimenko asked them.

"You. Aren't you Lieutenant-Colonel Ustimenko?"

"Yes, that's me. Please sit down."

They did.

The one wearing a man's cap with ear-flaps was the first to speak.

"It's our Krayevoi who ought to be writing this about you of course. Krayevoi and no one else. It's his theme."

"Oh, Krayevoi would have made it a peach!" the other girl said, sighing. "He has a brilliant pen. He writes for *Patrioty Rodiny*, haven't you ever come across him at the front?"

"No, I never have."

"You mean you've never heard Krayevoi speak?"

"No, never. I have heard Boris Polevoi."

"Krayevoi is our Siberian journalist, he's a local man. Now then, shall we begin?"

Ustimenko was quite in the dark—begin what? Was someone playing a practical joke on him? And why would Krayevoi have made it a peach? Made what? The whole thing was embarrassing, indecent even, as if he had accidentally barged into a bathhouse for women. . . .

"Where were we. . . . Well, let us get down to business, Comrade Lieutenant-Colonel," said the more talkative of the two. "To begin with, will you tell us about your childhood and your student years. . . ."

"Very briefly," said the other girl. "In bare outline, as they say."

"But what for?" Volodya asked a shade too rudely. "I don't quite get what you're after, comrades. What has happened exactly? Has your newspaper received some material on my case or what? And what is this business you want us to get down to?"

They told him. Certain material had indeed come in. It was a letter to the newspaper from the hospital signed by three officers, Khatnyuk, Malevich and Sarantsev, and also by several doctors, describing the courageous conduct of a wonderful comrade, a gravely wounded surgeon who. . . .

"Oh, good God, what rot!" Volodya broke into a sweat in his agitation. "It's a lot of rot, a small matter. . . ."

The girls waited patiently for him to begin his story, and when he didn't, the shorter one shot her question at him:

"How much in your life do you ascribe to the influence of Nikolai Ostrovsky's wonderful book *How the Steel Was Tempered*? And, in particular, in your conduct here. . . ."

"What conduct?" Ustimenko exploded again. "There has been no conduct. . . ."

"No?" the more talkative girl said with a superior smile. "We've come straight from the hospital, you know, we were supplied with some very valuable details there. Modesty, of course, is a typical trait of the Soviet character, but the country must surely know her heroes. We talked to the doctors there, to Nikolai Fyodorovich himself, and to Maria Pavlovna, and they spoke very highly of your courage and your offering to help in the work while still so very, so terribly, so gravely ill. You actually joined in the work and made yourself an indispensable comrade. Please don't be angry, Comrade Lieutenant-Colonel, but it is in this

key, and only in this key, that we must work on the article. So please tell us about your childhood. Begin with your schooldays, if you like, and tell us precisely when you first felt the irresistible attraction of the humane profession of medicine. That particular moment—we must give it prominence—was the beginning of your road. . . .”

They sat facing him—two thin little girls in shabby overcoats worn on top of old padded jackets—and waited for him to speak, but he was still unable to tell them anything, and only grunted and snorted as he composed the crushing speech he would deliver to the damned authors of that letter when he went to the hospital for treatment next day. He’d have something to say to them! He’d tell them all he thought of them! What was the big idea anyway, damn them!

There’s no telling how this interview would have ended had not Vera come home from work just then, looking happy and flushed, with a bottle of milk in one hand and a lunch pail in the other. The girls took the things from her, and gazed at her with adulation as she dusted the snow from her uniform coat. She had such a lovely, supple figure, so many medals. She was a Medical Officer in the Navy, she was married to this famous man, she had been in sea battles while they were vegetating here, in the deep rear. They would never see a thing. They’d just grow old and stale here. All this was written on their pale, hungry-looking faces, and Vera responded instantly with really charming kindness. She had a big tea ready in no time, tinned cod, bread, butter and biscuits, which she had saved up from her supplementary Arctic rations, and while the girls were eating, she told them, glancing at Volodya with shining eyes, that he would never be able to cope with all the questions reporters were liable to ask—didn’t she know her own husband?—but everything would be fine if he’d only let her do the answering for him, which she hoped he would. She’d rather do it a little later, though, when he had gone to bed in the other room, because he’d sort of cramp her style.

“You don’t know how difficult he is, girls,” she said, twinkling charmingly and biting on a lump of sugar. “You’ve no idea how deceptive looks can be! He’s a horrible person! It’s only here that I’m not afraid of him, but oh, when he was my superior officer! Off to the guardhouse, for the smallest thing! When I fell in love with him, I permitted myself to put on a little lipstick, and he. . . .”

"Vera!" he said, in a low, shocked voice.

"Lusya, take it down!" said the more talkative of the girls.

Lusya, her mouth full, wrote quickly. Volodya got up and went into the other room, their bedroom, and turned on the radio. Moscow was broadcasting a piece played by a violin ensemble. They were playing for the front line and the home front, for Rodion Stepanov and Volodya, for Amirajibi and Varya, for Misha and Grisha, for the tankmen and the airmen, for the paratroopers and the submarinemen, for all those who had survived and were alive this evening. . . .

He lay down and closed his eyes.

"And I? Am I alive? Or have I capitulated?" he asked himself, clenching his teeth.

The girl reporters were laughing merrily in the living room.

He heard Vera's voice: "It was really touching, wasn't it, to bring the white mice to the theatre? He is like that!"

"Oh God!" Volodya groaned, and turned the music louder so he wouldn't have to hear what they said.

That night, when they were in bed, he asked Vera: "What's all this silly fuss about, the article I mean?"

"First, kiss me. I can't do without you all those hours and hours. . . ."

Only the lamp on their bedside table was left on—a pink porcelain owl. Vera lay close beside him, her cheek pressed against his shoulder. He heard her breathing, he heard the storm whistling outside the window of the overheated room, he heard the heart beats of this woman who had become his wife.

"Kiss me at once," she told him in a level voice. "And don't pout like a prudish damsel."

"Was this newspaper article your idea?"

"Foolish child!" she said with a little chuckle. "What's wrong with it? At the hospital they all talk about you as if you were a god, and it's to me they say the things, not to you. And so I said to them: your words can't be pinned on my lieutenant-colonel's chest, my good friends. Write to the newspaper about it. And I showed them the clipping from our fleet newspaper about your bravery."

"There was no such thing!"

"There was!" Vera said with the same little chuckle. "There was, silly. You don't remember, but even if you did you'd keep it a secret anyway. I fell in love with a big man, a somebody, I explained it all to you in minute detail ages ago, my silly dear,

and I'll never let you join the mediocrities, although it's less worrying and even more pleasant to be among them. . . ."

She raised her head, took one look into his eyes and, clutching his shoulders with her white hands began to shake him. Her heavy plait, so dark and glossy, slid down and lay like a snake on his throat, her mouth was smiling, and in the rosy light of the idiotic porcelain owl, he gazed intently, in oppressive misery, into her face, such a beautiful, young face, and thought that living with her had made him much lonelier in his inner world than he had ever felt, even in his loneliest and hardest days.

"What's up?" she asked in a low, anxious voice, and now she was not smiling.

Her plait slipped downward from his throat, he felt a strange relief, and suddenly thought with bitterness and envy of the bang sticking damply to the forehead of Sarantsev's love.

"Are you angry?" Vera asked, making an effort to understand him and only succeeding half-way, as usual. "Are you annoyed about the newspaper? You're convinced, I suppose, that the article will be badly written and the facts distorted? But I'll see to it, darling, they've promised to show it to me when it's ready for print, I'll edit it, after all I do know you and your tastes. Everything will sound very modest. I only wish you'd try to understand that you can't refuse. In the first place, I'd be sorry for those girls, they're so eager, they've made such *good friends* with their work. In the second place, the article will be of certain value for you, too. . . ."

"Now she'll start telling me that life is life," he thought with animosity, and immediately repented of his meanness, his refusal to see that she meant well, and of his sense of loneliness when he was with her, the only woman who cared for him sincerely, who believed in him and wanted him to be happy.

"You know, dear," he said with a tenderness that surprised himself. "Please, let's never organise anything in our life. Let's manage without this scheming, this energy, this push. What must be will surely be. . . ."

"It will simply be?" she asked gaily, covering his forehead with small, quick kisses. "Just like that? Yes, darling? If you don't take any steps and I don't organise anything, who'll worry about us? Who cares about us? I don't get you, my silly boy with his head in the clouds! No, you'd better not put me off. What good is a wife if she can't be of real help to her husband? You're a sap, and you know it. You're a huge talent, of course,

a great shining light, but you're a wee bit too spineless, my sweet. Pep is what you need, and I am just that for you. Just trust me, try to understand that heaven has sent you a wife of miraculous strength, and then together we'll move mountains. All right? Why d'you look at me like that? Aren't I a good wife?"

And that is how they fell asleep that night—clinging so closely together, and yet so far apart, so separate, so different. They had been living together for a long time now, and were a family. They had a home where friends dropped in to see them of an evening. He called her his wife and she called him her husband, and though no priest had married them, though they'd never stood before the altar or exchanged wedding rings, their marriage had been consummated, and now, for a long time to come or perhaps for ever, they would be obliged to watch over their common, family interests. Why? What interests?

However, the formal ceremony also took place before long.

One day, the chief physician, who was a stern, outspoken man, remarked to Volodya as if in passing but still rather sharply: "Don't you think, Lieutenant-Colonel, that your relationship with Dr. Veresova should be legalised in accordance with the practice established by the state? Her delicacy of feeling naturally prevents her from making certain finer points clear to you, but it is one thing leaving the fighting lines to come to the side of a wounded man, and quite another. . . ."

"I understand perfectly," Volodya said.

On the evening of the day when their marriage was solemnised at the registry office in Starodolsk, Vera told her husband that she was pregnant. He pulled her close, strongly and tenderly, he saw her cheeks flushing hotly and her eyes suddenly filling with tears.

"Vera, forgive me for everything," he said quickly. "I'm irritable and captious, don't say anything now, keep quiet, I know I'm unfair and horrible to you. But everything will pass. You must believe me, I'll take myself in hand. I will truly! You won't know me!"

"I am happy," she said softly. "I am happy, darling. I promise to make you a good wife."

Then, in a very low voice, she asked: "Who d'you think it will be? A boy or a girl?"

* * *

It was backbreaking work.

Before he began on his training session he would lock and bolt the door, get his simple equipment from under the sofa where he kept it hidden, and then put his watch on the table before him.

A grim line would appear between his knitted brows.

At first, his weak, practically helpless fingers kept losing their grip on the ball, and he was obliged to get down on his knees to retrieve the toy, a slow and painful task which he managed by leaning on his crutch, then holding on to the back of a chair, and finally hanging onto the arm-rest of the sofa. With time and practice he learnt to do the exercise sitting on the bed, so even if he did lose the ball it could not roll far. And then the ball stopped jumping away altogether, it was Volodya who was in control now, and not the other way about.

"What? Jump away, would you?" he would say to the ball. "I'll bounce you, you son-of-a-gun!"

At the hospital, Nikolai Fyodorovich said to him: "Easy does it. Don't go at it for hours at a time, do it for, say, ten minutes every hour. It's a safer and surer way."

He could not train when Vera was at home. It hurt him to have her picking up the ball for him. Occasionally she offered advice, good, competent advice, but he had gone through all of it himself and wanted no advice from anyone because he knew best what he could do and what he couldn't do at all, and wouldn't be able to do for a long time yet. And she only knew it from books, and insisted on what their famous authors said. Incidentally, those famous men helped him but little. The man who did help him a lot, surprisingly, was Sarantsev with his engineer's knowledge, inventiveness and stubborn keenness. After watching Volodya doing his exercises at the hospital one day, he made a thin, knotted rope for him to be drawn in a special way through his maimed fingers. Next, he made a number of small aluminium balls and threaded them on a length of wire; and after that, a small, unique device which he worked on at the joiner's bench the hospital had, christening the device with a foreign-sounding name "trainagé extra". Old Bruin gave his blessing to all these devices, but Sarantsev was an ambitious inventor and did not stop there: using some discarded hot-water bottles, a rubber bulb and several knitting needles, he constructed a most useful contraption with which Volodya exercised for hours.

From time to time, but not very often now, he was tortured by his neuroma, and walking was still painful, but compared to what he had to suffer before it seemed almost trifling.

There was only one thing that drove him frantic now, and this was the special nourishing diet Vera forced on him, insisting that he was emaciated.

"You want feeding up," she often told him with a grave and thoughtful air. "And I mean really feeding up. You have no right to treat this matter with your everlasting irony. You must become a healthy, complete, whole man. You must..."

"Make *good friends* with food?"

"Yes, make good friends with food," she repeated seriously and even crossly, never understanding how much he hated some of her fancy expressions. "After all, it's your duty as the father of our coming child."

And again, one of those mysterious mechanisms which she managed so adroitly did the trick with astonishing speed and efficiency: a food parcel arrived at the flat for Ustimenko, and thereafter special food cards, some coloured grey and others brown, were issued to Vera every month. He supposed it was all perfectly above-board, he did not doubt it actually, but she could not have engineered it without making a "pathetic appeal", a thing he hated fiercely, and the thought was maddening, just as maddening as having porridge, dumplings, vareniki, and corned beef and potatoes, stuffed down his throat all the time.

"In your case, nourishing food is a must," Vera told him emphatically. "You need proteins. And carbohydrates. Ah, if you would only give up smoking! Surely you have enough will power to do it? Try to understand, dear, you're poisoning yourself!"

It was perfectly true, indisputably true, about the food and the smoking. It was, in fact, so true that it amazed him how anyone could talk about it in earnest?

Occasionally he came to the hospital in the capacity of a doctor, but after the things they wrote about him in that newspaper article, it became something of an ordeal for him. People stared at him and exchanged eloquent looks. Everyone was much too attentive and he was made to walk ahead of Nikolai Fyodorovich when they made the round together. This was all the more exasperating because Vera intimated to him more than once, in her peculiarly mocking manner loaded with meaning, that much of it was part of a plot, conceived and carried out not entirely without her guidance and participation. Even

Ashkhen, it appeared, had made that flying visit not of her own free will but because certain steps had been taken by Vera, such as writing to Kharlamov, to the Chief Surgeon of the Navy, and even to the Commander.

"My poor idealist!" she said. "You're always dreaming up something touching and noble! Of course, your precious Ashkhen is a sport. But she's a very, very old woman! Why the devil should she rush here by plane? And Kharlamov? He's busy enough, a man in his position. No, my pet, no pains no gains, as the saying goes. To get something moving you've got to give it a good push. And so I gave it that push, and things began to move, because the right signature on a piece of paper determines a lot. My sincere advice to you is don't waste any more time on our hospital. You'll get nothing more from them, although they fondly imagine that they are helping you to regain faith in your abilities. As if you and I couldn't manage it. . . ."

"I believe she's right," he thought sometimes, limping home from the hospital. "I won't go there again. To hell with them."

But he did not dare refuse to go when they called him because he did not wholly believe his wife. Surely not everything was done for his special benefit, not by everybody, and not all the time! The world was not like that, not the way Vera saw it. Supposing they really needed him that day, needed him badly? On the up and up? But maybe he had always been needed there, and now it was all too confusing to tell right from wrong. . . .

Do You Want My Frank Opinion?

"My work, give me back my work!" he whispered viciously. "You hear? I can't do without my work!"

He regarded his hands with hatred: they looked all right, perfectly normal hands now that they had been mended. They worked, too. He could cut himself a slice of bread; if he tried very hard he could roll himself a cigarette and even strike a match.

But would he ever operate?

Who'd give him the answer to that one?

Having done his set of exercises with the devices invented by Sarantsev, who had already left the hospital and gone home, Volodya lit a cigarette, settled down comfortably on the sofa, and opened Yevgeny's letter.

"What's the matter with you, old chap?" he read Yevgeny Stepanov's minute, rounded letters. "How dare you? Are you set on writing off our friendship? Out of sight out of mind? Now that your fame has spread throughout the country, you think you can snub your old, true friends? Is that the idea?"

"But anyhow I'll begin from the beginning. I've been laid up with a minor infection, I struggled on for a while and then, taking advantage of certain things, which I humbly admit, I got demobilised. We've done our bit in this war, we gave it all we had to give, let the young people finish the job. They gave me a good farewell, it was warm and from the heart. Wine was drunk, food was eaten, and tears were shed.

"I'm back home now and in command of our health dept. I'll tell you frankly, I want to cry 'Help!' at the top of my voice all day and all night. Staff—that is doctors, and other personnel, we have none, medicines—not a pill, rehabilitating the hospitals is an exceedingly difficult job, with building materials holding you up and everything. By and large, after the fascist invasion things are in such a state that you could weep. You understand, of course, that I'm not giving way to panic, I'm keeping myself under control, but certain difficulties do exist and that's a fact.

"And now, let's talk about you and your conduct.

"Your conduct is no good at all, old chap.

"Why didn't you send me that article about your heroic doings at the hospital? Too lazy? You sent a copy to my father, so why not to me? It's only today that I got the clipping from him, almost a full page about your wonderful person, and there was another clipping enclosed, it was from your fleet newspaper, one of last year's, with your pretty picture in the centre. Well, well, well!

"I'm glad and proud of you.

"I always believed in you, in your clearness of purpose, your single-mindedness, your devotion to Communist ideas, I always realised what you were, but this has knocked me all of a heap. It's doing things on a national scale, I mean. It shows your will power, your ordered strength, and what they call your inner beauty. I'm proud of you, friend, very proud.

"Our dear and merciless *Unchansky Rabochy* has naturally reprinted the article, adding a bit about your student years, things you hadn't told the reporters because of your blasted modesty. The article dropped like a bomb from the blue. The higher-standing comrades summoned me at once. Where's this famous

Ustimenko of yours? Bring your Ustimenko here, they say, we'll make better conditions for him than for anyone else. The man has earned it, after all.

"That's from the chiefs.

"And this is from me: Volodya, come.

"We'll give you a hospital, you'll be your own boss. In this town your name has been made for you already. You're a legendary hero. You'll find yourself some competent assistants and get down to work on your dissertation. I'll bet you've got any number of themes, all nice and ready, you won't have to go borrowing one like we, wretched pillmongers, have to do. Before long you'll be a candidate and then a doctor of science. People will flock to hear you present your thesis, it will be like a first night, you know that yourself—a direct hit with a guarantee. Well, and after that, all roads will be open to you—if it's Moscow you want, you can have Moscow, if it's abroad you want to go, who'll refuse you an opportunity to perfect your knowledge? And at the same time, you'll be elected to all sorts of collegiums, delegations and suchlike. I'm sure of it. It will be flattering for us, your fellow townsmen. And then there's no meanness in you, so you'll say a kind word for us somewhere and we'll be more than satisfied with these crumbs from your table.

"In short, send your reply by telegram at once. Your daily allowance and all the rest of it is 'can do', to use my superintendent's expression. Lodgings, too.

"There are no changes in our life. Varya has received her discharge, and is now working with some geological prospecting party or other. If you're interested, she lives *alone*. Oh you silly, silly asses, you have yourselves to blame for breaking up your life! My old man is now a Rear-Admiral and a Hero, and though he's still fighting on his sea communications and sinking German ships, I think he's about played out—his heart isn't pumping properly, and, besides, certain complications have set in, I hope you know what I mean. We'll discuss it when we meet. In short, you know my old man, he must have kicked up a row in the wrong place—that's my guess anyway.

"My mother died heroically. You've heard about it, I expect. I'm proud to be her son.

"Zhovtyak and your beloved Postnikov turned traitors. I always knew that Postnikov was capable of anything, a typical hireling of any intelligence service. I suppose it was he who dragged that scoundrel Zhovtyak down with him.

"To hell with them, it makes me sick to remember it even.

"Bogoslovsky has been here, he came to find the graves of his wife and daughter. He was very anxious to hear all about you, and when he learnt the details he actually shed a tear. He drinks a bit, otherwise he's a good doctor. When he's through with the army and if he stops drinking you can take him into your new hospital. I'll gladly sanction it.

"Iraida sends you her very, very best.

"So does young Yurka, he's a most amusing kid.

"Phew, what a lot we have to talk about!"

And although the whole tone of the letter annoyed Volodya, just as everything else that came from Yevgeny invariably did, he did not lightly dismiss his invitation to come and work in Unchansk. On the contrary, he gave it serious consideration. Rather than squeeze that blasted rubber ball from dawn till dark, and then start up in a sweat in the middle of the night from the frightening thought that it was all no use, that he'd never have his theatre again with its tense atmosphere of competent calm—shouldn't he start doing something else at once, without putting it off, without indulging in any more self-pity, start doing something he could do, something useful?

However, Vera had to read the letter first.

Until now they had never talked about the future, as if consciously avoiding the subject. Maybe it was time they did give the future a thought? Maybe it was time to plan it, if only tentatively?

"But isn't she doing just that? Why else does she send those newspaper clippings to people?" The thought struck him suddenly, and he shook his head to drive it away. These mean little thoughts about his wife always came of their own accord, he never called them up. "There's nothing to it, what's wrong with her sending that clipping to Rodion, she knew he'd be glad, that's all."

The letter was lying on the dinner table when Vera came home from the hospital. Volodya, reclining on the small bow-legged sofa, was reading an English book about cacti. He had gone to a great deal of trouble to get it from Moscow, and finally it was sent to him by a friend of Nikolai Fyodorovich. The room was hot—there was no lack of firewood in these parts.

"Who's this from?" Vera asked.

"From Yevgeny."

"Yevgeny who? Or am I supposed to guess?"

She often snapped at him now. Her pregnancy was not an easy one, and besides it was tiring work in the hospital.

"It's from Yevgeny Stepanov, Varya's half-brother," he told her calmly. "Read it, it's a curious epistle."

"You don't mind?"

"No, of course not."

He did not feel like talking. Burbank's magnificent sentence about the amazing viability of all those opuntias, mammillae and cerei fascinated and touched him.

"I'll be damned!" he said aloud, in a melting voice.

"What's the matter?"

He translated the passage for her into Russian. She regarded him calmly and coldly with her dark eyes.

"Not bad, eh?"

"Probably," she said and rustled the pages of Yevgeny's letter again.

Volodya lay back on his sofa and lit a cigarette. An opuntia had sprouted after being forgotten in a dark corner for four whole years. This completely withered plant was found to be alive and perfectly healthy after it had long been given up for dead. And grafting?

"What are you so busy thinking about?" Vera asked, when she had read the letter to the end.

"Cacti."

"So you're going to be a cactus breeder now and not a surgeon?"

He plainly heard animosity in her voice. Why must she talk to him in that tone?

"I could hardly be a surgeon just now," he said, trying to control his temper. "With hands like mine, I couldn't operate even with you there. . . ."

"Why 'even' with me? What do you mean?"

"I didn't mean anything. You wouldn't let me operate from pity alone. After all, you are my wife. . . ."

"Why after all?"

It was the beginning of absurdity, the hellish absurdity of their marriage.

"Let's not quarrel, darling," he said. "It's difficult to talk to you when you've got a preconceived notion that all I want to do is hurt your feelings. Let's talk about this letter instead. Tell me what you think of it."

"Do you want my frank opinion?" she asked, her voice still hostile and suspicious. "My honest opinion?"

"Yes, naturally."

"I don't like this letter."

"Neither do I!" Volodya said. It was a relief. But in the same moment he shot a wary look at Vera: it couldn't be, her reasons for disliking Yevgeny's proposal couldn't be the same as his. "I didn't like it at all, there's much there that's unacceptable to me."

Vera was silently examining her pink palms. Volodya waited. "Something will be decided now," he thought suddenly. "It will be now, and probably for ever."

"The ward patients, the bother, the drudgery, it's too stupid," Vera said deliberately and clearly, looking straight into his eyes. "That's not where your road lies, darling. You'd get too involved, you'd get stuck there, caught up in the routine, if you know what I mean."

He did not speak.

She had missed the point, as usual. The half she had understood happened to be the wrong half. He had a vague foreboding of trouble, it distressed him, and she made it worse by taking her time, smiling and thinking.

"I don't think I understand. . . ."

"But what is there to understand?" she asked with scornful dismay. "It's all so plain, so clear, it might be there in my palms. . . ." She held out her beautiful narrow hands, palms up.

"You are not a Chekhov's lonych, as your old ladies imagined, you are a scientist." Her voice was soft and imperious. "You are the only gifted man I have ever met in my life. And you have no right to be no more than a practising physician. I, Dr. Vere-sova, who can never be more than a practising surgeon, won't let it happen. I always knew you had the makings of a big man, and since you've had this misfortune my conviction has grown stronger still. It is, indeed, in misfortune that you have fully found yourself. . . ."

"Fiction! A lot of cheap fiction!" he cried. "Do you think I'm such a fool that I don't know it was a put-up job consulting me about Sarantsev? You told me about it yourself, you remember. You did, don't wave your hand, I didn't understand at the time, of course, though I had my suspicions, but later I saw through it all. All those things put together—your tearful letter and the kindness of good people, my colleagues—did

the trick, and my moment of weakness passed, the moment when I . . ."

He almost told her about the fifty tablets of luminal, but checked himself in time.

"Please, do me a favour, don't dream me up. I'm not nearly as fine as your imagination paints me."

"So you want to take the chief physician's job?" she interrupted, apparently not listening. "You want to go to your Yevgeny Stepanov and slave for him year after year, for his health department and his bureaucratic prosperity? And in your spare time, of which you'll have none of course, sitting up nights, month after month, instead of sleeping and living a normal life, you'll begin, and I mean only begin, working on your dissertation without a spark of brilliance?"

"What will I do this dissertation on?" Volodya asked, composure suddenly returning to him now that he was sure the crisis had passed. "Have you any interesting themes to suggest? Something that our army of medical men simply cannot do without? Or do you think I've had a theme like that up my sleeve for a long time? Or should I inquire of the brainy ones what theme to take up, the way lots of quacks do? Without a spark of brilliance!" he mimicked her. "A brilliant dissertation results when the writer is working on something useful and much needed. But if brilliance is displayed only in the presentation of the thesis, and just barely passes off for brilliance at that, and afterwards this neatly bound drivel is kept as a document entitling the author to a raise in pay, what use is that? What, in the words of a person of average decency, would you call it? Well? Why don't you say something?"

An expression of timidity appeared on Vera's face.

"I don't understand," she said in a small, frightened voice. "People present their candidate's and their doctor's theses all the time, it's natural, it's done, and your ravings just now, why, no one could possibly understand. . . ."

"If you don't, it doesn't mean that no one could possibly understand me," he said. "And, incidentally, you'd hardly say that we have always understood each other at a glance or a word, would you? Now make an effort and remember: did I ever say that my thesis would be a heaven-sent gift to humanity and did I ever brag about it to you? And what have I ever done in my life to make you or anyone else think me a kind of phenomenon? Is it my fault? Perhaps in my schooldays, before

you knew me, I did think I was a hell of a clever fellow, but that was in my youth, my childhood almost, and now I have no illusions about my abilities at all, especially in this situation, with my very limited usefulness. . . .”

“Oh, rot!” Vera suddenly exclaimed with light-hearted ease, and Volodya immediately sensed the artificiality of this lightness and ease, behind which she had simply tried to conceal her dread of the chasm towards which the conversation was leading them. “Rubbish! It’s awful what we’ve talked ourselves into. You’ve worn yourself out with all those harrowing thoughts about yourself as a surgeon, and I’ve had a tiring day. Naturally, you can’t decide this in a minute. When we go to Moscow. . . .”

This lack of understanding, rising like a wall between them, drew a sigh from him.

“What’s this about us going to Moscow?” he asked with dull surprise. “Where does Moscow come in?”

“Why darling!” Vera said, trying to speak gently, as to a child. “Darling! And Kharlamov’s letter? He said he hoped—remember what he wrote to you?—he said he hoped you’d work together when all this was over. . . . He wrote it after you were wounded, he wrote it knowing all about it. . . .”

Amazing how well she remembered what followed what, how well she remembered dates, and who said something first and who said it afterwards. Like a legal adviser, as if she were preparing to be at law with someone all her life!

“Yes, and what follows?”

“It follows that if you must go as chief physician, go to Kharlamov and not to your Yevgeny. You’ll have very different prospects in Moscow. Kharlamov has a powerful name, and with your war record. . . .”

“Stop talking about my war record!” his anger-laden voice sank to almost a whisper. “Forget those words, understand? Or else I’ll tell you what it’s called, all this activity you’ve been engaging in lately, and then things will go really wrong with us. . . .”

“What is it called?” she asked, turning pale.

“What? Scheming to get a write-up in the papers, what do you think it’s called? And your circulating those clippings yourself among various people, how am I supposed to feel about that?”

“What people? If you mean the health department or Tsvetkov who has done so much for you. . . .”

"Stop it. Have you no shame? It's all part of the same thing—circulating those newspaper clippings, wangling those supplementary ration cards, asking for gifts of food, and..."

"Shut up!" she cried shrilly. "Don't you dare! I do it all for you—the newspaper clippings, and the rations and everything. I never touch the food, it's all for you..."

"I don't care, I only know it's disgusting." He stood up, a tall, thin, stooping man with a shaking chin. "The whole thing stinks. You've got to understand, you've no right not to understand, and if you still can't understand, I'll make you stop exploiting my record, damn it, profiting by it! I will make you stop!"

"Profit?" she said almost inaudibly. "Exploiting, you said?"

There was no indignation, hurt or pain in her eyes. They were stark with horror. As if she had seen her own death.

"Ah, Volodya," she whispered. "Ah, Volodya, dear, why did you say that? It's irreparable, you know, Volodya."

Of course it was. Naturally.

"Profiting by a thing means getting something for oneself, doing it for oneself, and I?" she asked, pressing her hands to her throat, and trying to hold back her sobs. "Am I doing it for myself? You're all mixed up, you really are worn out, but then I'm so tired too, I'm so exhausted..."

Of course, exploiting meant lining one's own pockets in the first place, but supposing it was done for one's darling son or daughter? However, what could he hope to explain to her now, when even in much simpler cases they understood each other no more than half-way? And in this case? It was true, wasn't it, that she did it all for him.

"Forgive me, Vera, I suppose you're right. And let's not talk about it again..."

Roughly these words have been spoken millions of times by husbands and wives of all times and nations, and what they mean, in effect, is this: "You and I are terribly alone together. Unutterably, unbearably alone!"

Volodya was thinking this as he listened to Vera's even breathing in sleep, and then came back into the living room to sit on the sofa and read a bit more. He lit a cigarette, and smiled when he came to the passage, someone had underlined in pencil, about the courage and endurance of cacti which died standing.

And suddenly he remembered how he had detested those plants in the new flat where Alevtina Andreyevna lived with her

Dodik, how spitefully he called the picture they had on the wall a "portrait of a cactus", how he bored Varya with his questions about the use of those prickly things, and how altogether intolerant, nasty and difficult he was then. . . .

"And now?" he asked himself.

He shook his head, leaving the question unanswered, and went to open the front door—it was Nikolai Fyodorovich's ring. He often dropped in on his way home from the hospital to have a chat, drink a cup of tea, and smoke a cigarette in peace. This time he did not come in, it was too late, he said, and gave Volodya a letter which someone had brought the day before and which had since been lying about on his desk.

They stood on the porch for a while. It was already a spring night with the drip of thawing snow, a light mist, and above it a black sky hung with big, shimmering stars.

"Did you hear today's communique?" Nikolai Fyodorovich asked.

"Yes. Three towns in one day. . . ."

"The end is in sight, yes it's in sight. And really! It's time the people had a rest. They've grown tired with fighting. . . ."

He remained there a little longer, grunting and sighing, and then started homewards, slithering in his rubbers along the muddy, springtime street.

And Volodya, recognising Tsvetkov's writing on the envelope and never noticing that it was addressed to Vera Veresova, sat down on the sofa, slit the envelope, pulled out the sheets of thick white note paper, and read the letter from beginning to end. This is what it said:

"Vera darling,

"I'm availing myself of this chance but safe opportunity, so for once you'll get a letter from me without any trouble. You can give your answer to the bearer, you don't have to be careful what you say, because this man works under me and he'll deliver everything safely to me here in my office.

"What shall I say to you, Vera dear?

"To me, those days round about November 7th, will also remain delightfully memorable. I gladly subscribe to all that you have written about those happy hours. All those little things which you, being a woman, remember so well, will not be forgotten by me either, not for a long time, even though I'm a male who's been places and seen things. In any case, while our old planet exists, and somewhere, on some dot on its surface

there's you—Eve's own daughter, sinful, seductive and beautiful, the way I know you and remember you—I will always, no matter how our lives shape, remember you in minute detail, gaily and, forgive me if I'm old-fashioned, passionately. There are things which even my sort, with everything tried and experienced, will find impossible to forget. . . .

"However, enough of that.

"You must, of course, live in Moscow. It's ridiculous arriving here after everyone else. Suggest this to your husband (as coming from me, if you like). I quite agree with your plan of action, your wisdom in this matter as well made me very glad. Why didn't I appreciate all your qualities before, when we were on the march with our Death to Fascism detachment? Why didn't I guess anything? Oh well. What's been done has been done, there's no turning back the clock.

"Now then. The two of you should arrive in Moscow not later than the end of May, that is if you can't make it right now. Appointments through both channels, that is ours and his (I mean your husband) will be ready and waiting. Your husband undoubtedly deserves the most honourable post and the one most convenient for him. We'll find him a nice little theme for his dissertation, there are lots of themes available only we've got to make a clever choice, the occasion must be not just solemn, it must also create that elegant stir which in all times and ages accompanies genuine success. I'll undertake to prepare Vladimir Afanasyevich for the presentation of his thesis on whatever theme strikes me as worthy of him and also as conducive to our general well-being. Your husband has suffered so much that he, naturally, has every right to an easy, comfortable life. And as a wife you won't be worth much if you don't help him in this honourable undertaking.

"Answering this long letter of mine apart, write to me as usual c/o my Fonichov. He wouldn't talk under torture.

"My wife sends you her best regards. You have quite captivated her heart, she is quite enraptured with you. As a matter of fact, our tastes never differ.

"Yours,
"Konstantin."

Volodya put the letter down on the table, smoothed out the envelope and looked at the address again: yes, it said Vera Veresova, there was no mistake there.

He felt no grief, horror or indignation. He only felt cold all of a sudden and badly wanted to smoke. Pressing his back to the tiled stove, he inhaled deeply on his cigarette, made with the strongest home-grown tobacco, and in spite of himself remembered the period "round about November 7th". Vera's letters from Moscow had been so sweet and loving, there had been one every day. But on the whole it was all so drearily simple: Tsvetkov was a married man who did not even contemplate divorce, and Vera wanted to "build a nest", it was the sort of expression she liked to use. "Every woman wants to be a beloved wife and a loving mother," she used to say, and he listened and agreed with her. Naturally, of course, it could not be otherwise. . . .

"Darling," she called to him sleepily through the half-open bedroom door. "Has someone been? I thought I heard the front door bell."

He did not answer at once, and then said: "Yes."

"Who was it?"

"Nikolai Fyodorovich. He brought a letter for you. I didn't realise it was for you, from Tsvetkov, and read it. But it's meant only for you."

The bedroom showed a light. Vera had switched on her hateful pink owl.

"Please give me the letter," she said in a steady voice. "If it isn't too much trouble."

Trying not to look at her, he handed her the envelope. The sight of her naked arms, shoulders and bosom, and her long, glossy plaits filled him with shame. "What a gorgeous body," he thought venomously. "What riches for a clever partner!"

Turning to leave the room he said: "Tomorrow, I'll be going to the hospital for a couple of weeks. There's some trouble with my leg. Think everything over. This thing should not affect the child who must anyhow be mine, taking the time factor into consideration. Well, that's that."

He closed the door behind him.

"Life will always be life," he said below his breath.

Minutes later Vera called him, but he did not answer. She called again. Again he made no answer. And then she appeared in the doorway, looking pale, tall and even arrogant in her flowered dressing gown.

"The dressing gown has been with her to Moscow," he thought.

"All right, I'm guilty, I'm guilty all round," she said irritably. "Strike me, kill me, do what you will. I always liked him and never concealed it from you. And in Moscow I was swept off my feet, I lost my head. You didn't answer my letters, there was not a word from you, and he was nice to me, understanding, generous. . . ."

Still, he said nothing.

"Well, what now?" she demanded shrilly.

He glanced at her with calm, weary eyes, and made no answer.

"Good, fine, excellent," she said, too agitated to know what she was saying. "Splendid. Even supposing I fell in love with him, it's past, it's over, I don't reproach you with your Varya, do I? It's you I love. . . ."

"The whole point is, Vera, that you never loved anyone and you don't even know the meaning of the word love—love for a human being. You do love and are capable of loving one thing only—success. I knew it, but from inertness and for certain other reasons we shall not go into now, I settled for a compromise with my own feelings. And so I am as much to blame as you. Only the child is not to blame for anything. Only the child. And let's not go back to the subject again, if you don't mind. We'll each live our own life, without interfering with the other. And, of course, without reproaching one another with anything. However, it's up to you to decide. . . ."

Collecting his tobacco, matches, cigarette paper and the book on cacti, he took himself off to the kitchen, leaving her by herself. Weeping, she tore up Tsvetkov's letter into tiny bits, thoroughly and meticulously, as if it were work that had to be treated seriously.

See? You Can Still Be Useful

"Keep calm!" he told himself. "Pull yourself together, you hysterical sap, you sorry thing! Pull yourself together, or you'll never be any use to anyone at all. Come on!"

He stood in the middle of the room. He did not know if he was saying this aloud or just thinking it. He was freshly shaven, neat and clean, he had rolled up the sleeves of his shirt as if they were the sleeves of his theatre robe, but he was unable to pull himself together, to control his excitement, to concentrate. Maybe it was the music that put him off—the Victory Day broad-

cast from Moscow? But how could a day like that put anyone off?

The buoyant, warm wind whipped the white curtain out into the middle of the room, and it gave Volodya's face a playful slap. A crowd of boys raced along the quiet street with crazy, happy war cries. Yes, the war was over, it was Victory Day!

It had come, and in his fleet at this very moment the men in their black naval overcoats were probably lined up on parade, with the merry, sunny, springtime blizzard ringing and whistling about them. He could see the snow sparkling on the hilltops. The ships were probably still, and the commander was speaking with tears starting to his eyes, just as they were starting to his own eyes, for one could not hold back one's tears on this day of consummated Victory.

Rodion was there, and Amirajibi, and Misha and Grisha, and Kharlamov, and old Levin—they were all there, in that ringing, cold wind, on those black rocks. . . .

"No, to hell with that!"

He tossed his head and listened: Moscow was celebrating, brass bands were blaring, the announcer said joyfully: "We are in Red Square!"

Vera was not at home, she had gone to the meeting at the hospital. No one had stayed at home, he supposed, only he. . . .

Again and again he flexed his fingers, clenched and unclenched his hands, and sighed.

The landlady's cacti, which he had nursed so carefully all those long winter months, were in good shape, very good shape. They were hard and strong, with tough spikes. His tools were there, ready at hand: his well-sharpened scalpel, a razor blade and some rubber bands with which he would secure the scion to the stock.

"Well, boys, here goes!" he said briskly, addressing the plants.

The buoyance was to brace himself up.

He dipped the razor blade in methylated spirit. Then, with a light, swift, precise and strong circular motion he made the cut on the cereus stock; now, his mind working with cold, calm precision, he speculated on where to cut the globular echinocactus for the scion. Forgetting about his hands, forgetting that he was a cripple, he picked up the tiny spike he had prepared beforehand with his surgical forceps and pinned the scion to the stock. After that, following the instructions in the book to the letter,

he wrapped cotton wool round the graft and secured it with a rubber band.

He had a new plant before him, a wonderful, quaint creation. He examined his work with a critical look from under his bushy eyebrows, reproved himself for not fitting the cuts with greater precision, and then began to prepare for the next operation. He heard nothing now—neither the brass bands, nor the songs, nor the poems. He was working. And though this was not really work yet, only a prelude to work, he was living again as a man should live. His hands knew what they had to do, he had trained them by sheer force of will power, he had made them obey, and on this day of great victory he was also celebrating his own private victory. Had there been any more, he would have grafted another hundred of the tiniest cacti to learn to trust his hands completely. . . .

He lit a cigarette and leaned back in his chair. He felt strangely dizzy. The warm wind swelled out the curtain more and more, it whipped out into the room and snapped behind his back. And in this wind, this warmth, this sweet, intoxicating languor, listening with his eyes half-closed, he heard two lines of poetry which he was to remember for a long time to come, and repeat to himself at different moments of his life, as if speaking a charm:

*People need no longer dread the sky,
Peaceful, with the new moon riding high. . . .*

He sighed and said:

"See? You can still be useful."



Chapter 13

Eagles

After a fortnight of complete fog, with the wind whistling despondently, there came a singularly clear, warm evening which somehow enhanced the sadness of the moment: it seemed that the sea, to which Rear-Admiral Stepanov, had given his whole life, wanted to give him a splendid send-off.

At 18:00 Stepanov began to say good-bye to the ships of his flotilla. At 17:30, PO Sharipov had laid out his dress uniform, with all the decorations and medals pinned on, his waist belt, dirk and gloves, had helped him dress, and had then brought him a glass of tea in a holder and a plate of sugar, broken into small pieces. The tea was hot and very strong, stronger than

usual, but Stepanov had only taken a sip and, forgetting in his preoccupation to make his customary acknowledgment of Sharipov's gift for making tea, had gone up on deck where the new Flotilla Commander, a member of the Naval Council of War, and the Chief of Staff of the flotilla of destroyers were waiting for him.

Surgeon Colonel Zinaida Mikhailovna Bakunina, who was well known in the fleet, had remained behind in the saloon with Sharipov. Dr. Bakunina had attended the iron Rear-Admiral, as he was called, when he collapsed with his first infarct. After that, she made it a rule to call on him whenever she came to these parts, and Stepanov was always very glad to see the old lady and greatly enjoyed the long chats he had with her.

Left alone there with Sharipov, she lit a cigarette and picked up the fleet newspaper, but she did not feel like reading.

"Please, don't forget to take down that picture," she said to him in her polite, gentle voice. "It's Rodion Mefodyevich's daughter, isn't it?"

The old lady glanced up at the wall on which hung a framed picture of Varya in uniform, with her hair brushed straight back.

"She's a lieutenant in the Engineers, if I'm not mistaken?"

"No, you are not mistaken," Sharipov replied stiffly.

He did not feel like talking, especially with this chatty lady doctor. He wanted to brood in silence, but she was obviously bent on talking and it set him against her.

"I remember this photograph from long ago, when *Slavny* was his flagship," she said. "Yes, whatever his flagship, there you'd be sure to see his daughter's picture on the wall."

"*Slavny* has never been his flagship," Sharipov told her. "*Slavny* is a young ship. . . ."

"What are you talking about! It's not my first day in the Navy, I know all your ships well. . . . Now that the war is over I come here only on and off, but I served here all through the war!"

She sounded hurt.

Sharipov felt a moment of pity for the kind and polite old lady, but he did not say anything. Certainly, she was a colonel and a merited comrade, she had stood up to the hardships of war like a man, but she shouldn't tell seamen which ship had been the Rear-Admiral's flagship and which had not. And anyway it would have been much better if the Rear-Admiral had been treated by someone other than her, by Major Ukhovtsov,

say. Dr. Bakunina was an experienced specialist, he hadn't said otherwise, and his feeling like this about a woman doctor was probably just prejudice. The fleet newspaper was quite rightly campaigning against this kind of thinking, but still why take a risk in a matter of such importance? It was all very well to fight against superstition and prejudices when only small things were at stake. The other day, at the seamen's club at the naval base, a lecturer from the Political Administration had talked to them very interestingly and intelligently about the harm done by superstition and prejudice. Sharipov himself had shouted "bravo", but a talk before a film show with dancing afterwards was one thing, and the life of Rear-Admiral Stepanov quite another. They had gone and called that old lady doctor in, brought her on to the ship, and this was the result—the Rear-Admiral was being retired from the Navy. But if they had called in that bad-tempered Surgeon Major Ukhovtsov, instead of a woman, everything would have certainly ended quite happily. Sharipov was not alone in thinking as he did, the cook, the boatswain, and probably many others, thought so too. Not that they discussed it, they merely sighed and wondered. If they ever did, they referred to the matter indirectly, taking care not to be caught in the act and accused of prejudice and superstition.

The cook, for instance, argued it this way: "Surgeon Colonel Bakunina is the best there is on shore. But it's different on board ship. Ships are a man's business. If it were not so why not take on female crews. All the way up to the highest commanding officers? And yet, prejudice or no prejudice, I've never yet seen a girl naval officer. Right, Sharipov?"

"Right!" Sharipov had replied, glad that he and the cook saw eye to eye in this. "You've said it."

It had been whispered among the sailors that whenever Bakunina came on board the boatswain furtively nibbled at a mouldy black rusk he kept handy for such an emergency, to ward off evil. And when Sharipov had caught him red-handed, the boatswain had told him without even a trace of embarrassment: "The Rear-Admiral means more to me than all this talk about superstition. I've been with him all through the war, look at the fighting we've done together, I kept the ship afloat and I've got six decorations. What's wrong with biting a rusk? Some black magic that! Won't do anyone any harm. . . ."

And the unsuspecting Dr. Bakunina had continued calling regularly on the Rear-Admiral, taking his blood pressure, making

electrocardiograms, and arguing with him about the harm of strong tea and the good of a correct diet. Sharipov had felt sorry for her, ashamed of being prejudiced against her, and maddened by her refusal to understand and go back to Moscow or somewhere and leave Ukhovtsov in charge. However, had Sharipov read a similar story in the newspaper, he would have shaken his head in doubt, and said:

"The stuff they write! Prejudice and superstition in our Navy! Hardly. These journalists don't know what they're talking about."

The wind blowing in from the sea brought the distant shouts of hurrah and then music.

"He's saying good-bye to the *Svirepy*," Bakunina said quietly, looking out of the porthole. "You know, I can't quite see your flotilla without Stepanov, nor Stepanov without his flotilla."

"There are no irreplaceable people," Sharipov answered sternly.

There was a puzzled look in the gentle eyes she turned on him.

"Yes, it's true," she said after a minute. "But still. . ."

"The new Commander is a highly thought of comrade," Sharipov said more stiffly still. He was kneeling in front of the Rear-Admiral's suitcase, and his narrow eyes looked up at her with anguish. "True, he's younger than the Rear-Admiral and he's only a Captain, but he fought well in the war and is a man of authority. People say it worries him how he's to command the flotilla after Stepanov. There's no doubt it's going to be hard, you've got to see his side of it too. Everyone will watch him and think: that's not how Stepanov would have acted. And maybe that's exactly how our Comrade Stepanov would have acted. Could be. Yes, the new commander's going to have it pretty tough, couldn't be tougher."

"Oh, naturally," Bakunina hastened to agree. "Of course it's going to be hard after a person like Rodion Mefodyevich. . ."

"Hard!" Sharipov thought resentfully. "A lot you know about it."

He missed a good half of what she was saying, and only listened when she told him what was in the medicine box she had packed for Stepanov's journey, when he should have had a validol, when the "gold drops", and when an injection of camphor, which for some reason Stepanov detested.

"Is there anything you don't understand?" she asked him at long last.

"I know all about it, it's not the first time," Sharipov answered. He was carefully repacking a box which contained a spare

pair of glasses, some reels of cotton, several needles stuck into a small square of cloth, a pair of scissors, and assorted pieces of uniform cloth.

"I'll manage, Comrade Colonel, don't you worry. Back in 1941, in the marines, the things I had to do. . . ."

"Even amputations, eh?" she asked jokingly.

"I didn't amputate any legs myself, but I could have done it easily," Sharipov replied imperturbably. "Under someone's guidance, of course. . . ."

"Oh, does he do his own mending?"

"Mending, ironing, pressing his pants, he does everything himself," Sharipov said with quiet pride. "He can mend better than any tailor. When his linen comes back from the laundry, he irons his undercollars over. And when it comes to cooking borshch, frying cutlets or making a bed—he has no equal. And polishing his buttons too. Seen them? What did he teach us? He taught us that a sailor must know everything, his naval duties apart, he must be a one-man orchestra at home too, when he goes on shore leave. The wife takes a rest, the grandmother takes a rest, and the mother-in-law takes a rest. Who'll repair a tractor at the MTS—a sailor. Who'll fix a combine harvester—a sailor again. Who'll mend his wife's shoes for her—himself, the sailor. He taught us that because we're away from home so much we've got to make things easy and jolly for them when we're there. . . ."

"He really said that?"

"That was the general idea. . . ."

Music broke out again. Bakunina looked out of the porthole and said she did not know what ship that was.

"That's the *Strogy*," Sharipov said from where he was. "Three more ships to go: *Smely*, *Stremitchny* and then our own *Svetly*. And then it will be all over, Comrade Colonel."

Springing to his feet, he measured out some drops, filled the glass with water from the carafe, poured it down his throat and wiped his mouth, as if he had taken his wartime ration of vodka instead of his medicine.

"What is it?" Bakunina asked in dismay.

"My nerves."

"You mustn't let yourself go," she advised him.

"Did I let myself go when he had his first stroke? It was in this room, Comrade Colonel, when you came by launch in the

middle of the night that you told us quietly that it was very bad, but did I let myself go? I didn't take drops then. . . ."

"No, you didn't then," she said, flushing slightly.

"Someone else did, but not me," he said, looking steadily at her. "A certain doctor did, but not Sharipov. Because I knew he wasn't going to die, he'd live, he'd stay with us, our Rear-Admiral would. But we're losing him now, he's no longer Commander Stepanov, he's saying good-bye to everyone, his bags are almost packed. He's going to be pensioner Stepanov now, a Hero of the Soviet Union on pension, and it's someone else, a good comrade but not Stepanov, who's going to command the flotilla now. Never you mind, we know our history, we know all about the role played by individuals and the role played by the masses, we're not a bunch of bloody fools, begging your pardon, Comrade Colonel, but then we also know our Stepanov. . . ."

Zinaida Mikhailovna was looking intently at Sharipov, at his narrow, flashing eyes, and the pin-points of sweat on his upper lip. Suddenly embarrassed, he squatted in front of the suitcase again and began to tighten the straps.

"Why did you suddenly stop?" she asked.

"What's the use of talking! You can't put much in words. Unless you begin from the very beginning, but I don't know how, so it's just talk. . . ."

He tugged hard at the strap, and when he began to buckle it he suddenly noticed that his hands were shaking. And immediately he remembered that gloomy autumn day in 1942, the dark water of the cold sea, and the smoke rising from the funnels of the four Maas destroyers preparing to attack the leader, and the German planes above them. The *Svetly* was manoeuvring, evading the bombs, the anti-aircraft guns barked continuously, and there were those warships on the horizon. He had brought a glass of hot tea for the Commander standing on the bridge, and the Commander had noticed how his hands shook. "Never mind," he had said. "Never mind, Sharipov, don't let it get you down, everyone feels afraid in the first battle. The main thing is to pull yourself together. And you will, I know. You'll fight like a lion. I'm not worrying about you."

What happened afterwards Sharipov remembered only vaguely, but the thing he would remember all his life was Stepanov coming to see him at the base hospital where he had been admitted with wounds and burns. They did not talk about anything then, the Commander merely sat beside him for a while

in silence, and then he gave him his first order, the first of four—it was the Red Star. "I was scared, and he wasn't worrying about me," Sharipov had been thinking in those minutes. "My hands were shaking, and he said I'd fight like a lion. I was worse than a blinking rabbit, and look what he made of me!" And tiny drops of tears had poured down quickly from under his burnt eyelids. . . .

"What's the matter? Are you ill?" Bakunina asked anxiously.

He sniffed loudly, turned away, and said in a huskyish but calm voice: "Mc? No, nothing's the matter with me, Comrade Colonel."

She shook her head and sighed. Sharipov buckled the straps on the suitcase, raised his head and listened. The music and the shouts of hurrah sounded quite close now.

A thin, very handsome man, in a well-cut dress uniform, walked in without knocking. It was Lieutenant Muratov, Commander of the *Svetly*. He shook hands with Dr. Bakunina, ran a critical eye over the table, and straightened the tablecloth.

"All ready?" he asked Sharipov. "Everything packed?"

"Everything. There's only the medicine and the syringe. I'll make it up into a package."

"Make it neat," Muratov told him. "He hates parcels and bundles." And, turning to Bakunina, said: "Could you please give me a cigarette, I've given up smoking, but I've been cadging cigarettes all day today."

He inhaled deeply, and looked at his cigarette with relish.

"You can't imagine what's going on, Zinaida Mikhailovna," he said, as if he were thinking aloud. "The men try to look bright, but their spirits are pretty low. The entire flotilla is bound up with him through the blood they shed together. I did practically no fighting, I came when it was all over but the shouting, so to speak, a long time after the famous landing when a doctor got wounded here, on our ship, he was the Rear-Admiral's relative, I believe. . . ."

Bakunina shivered, shot a quick look at Muratov, and said: "Yes, I know. Dr. Ustimenko. We used to work together. . . ."

"Yes, and though I practically did no fighting," Muratov continued, paying no attention to what Bakunina had said. "I nevertheless managed to learn a good deal of what Comrade Stepanov taught and practised. There's one wonderful trait in him—he trusts his fellow men. And, do you know, this trust is never misplaced."

"Only once," Sharipov spoke up unexpectedly, his voice hoarse with emotion. "He was mistaken in the person closest to him, his own wife. Begging your pardon, Comrade Lieutenant, but that's what I've heard."

Bakunina smiled sadly, and Muratov said in a pointedly formal tone: "I want to hear no more of your mess gossip, Petty Officer Sharipov."

"Aye, aye, sir," he replied sulkily, and busied himself, examining the buckles again and shifting the suitcases unnecessarily nearer the writing desk.

And then, as though unable to contain himself any longer, he asked: "What's the truth about Aglaya Petrovna? Didn't I myself hear him shouting, here in this very room when I happened to be within earshot, that he wouldn't let anyone slander his wife? Didn't I see him fling open the door for the man who came to interrogate him and again shout: 'Our Party will get to the bottom of this. It's not for you to stand there and preach to me in the name of the Party!' You just said that he had trust in his fellow men. You said 'his trust is never misplaced'. So how am I supposed to believe it, how am I supposed to take it, how can I accept the fact that my Rear-Admiral, and there's no finer man I know, lived with a traitor? I wish you'd give me an answer. I want to know. . . ."

"All right, Sharipov, what's the use," Muratov said quickly, without turning round, and it was evident that he found the subject both painful and difficult. "All right, the question is clear enough. . . ."

And Sharipov, realising that it was anything but easy for the Lieutenant to answer him, made a pretence of looking for a piece of string, and then asked permission to go and get some to tie up the medicine box.

"The eagles," Muratov said fondly, with a shade of mockery, after he had gone. "They find everything out. And nothing will convince them that the Rear-Admiral's wife could have been a bad person. There was a lot of talk here particularly in connection with that doctor friend of yours, the one who was wounded here. He is an adopted son or something of the Rear-Admiral's wife. . . ."

"Her nephew," Bakunina said with a small sigh.

"Her nephew, is he? Well, they found out that when this nephew's application for Party membership was being considered, he did not disown his aunt. That and his bravery during

the landing—they say your doctor put up quite a performance—convinced them that there was no truth in the rumour. They swore that their Commander was a true eagle, and that everything would soon be all right. Very soon or a little later, as the saying goes. That's the way they talk."

He had no time to tell her more. A messenger came in and reported that the Rear-Admiral's launch had left *Smely*. Muratov asked Dr. Bakunina to excuse him, straightened his cap, gave a tug to his dirk, and was gone. And immediately she heard the thud of the sailor's heavy boots down the steel companion-way, the sharp commands and Muratov's strong joyful, rolling voice. The Rear-Admiral was being piped on board, and everything was hushed: with him was the new Flotilla Commander and Dudyrin, a member of the Naval Council of War.

Suddenly, she felt her lips begin to tremble, and quickly getting a handkerchief out of her pocket, she pressed it to her eyes. Like all people who have known many real hardships in life, she never wept from sorrow now. Tears started to her eyes only when she felt that she was close to or in the presence of something good, kind and real.

The Young Cuckoo

A man with a walrus moustache was painting the fence, using bold, sweeping strokes. Two gardeners were pottering in the flower garden, one an elderly man of the Old Believer type, and the other, youngish, wearing a soldier's sweat-stained tunic and battered boots with tarpaulin tops. More men were working on the roof, whence came the staccato banging of several hammers.

"There, that's what I call going the whole hog," Yevgeny said, trying to get the stud out of his tight collar. "I like doing things on a grand scale, my darling sister. . . ."

Varya was dressed in a pair of ski pants and a blouse with a big blue and white polka-dot bow. Her hair was gathered at the back of her neck and tied with a ribbon of the same blue with smaller white dots.

"Let's sit down. I'm dog-tired," he said.

"You're getting fat," Varya said vaguely.

"Anyone would, my pet, sitting in that office chair all day. And the worry and bother besides."

"Go and practise medicine then!"

They came to a broad garden seat and sat down. Varya's face looked strained, as if she were trying to remember something. She kept glancing restively about her.

• "What's the matter?" Yevgeny asked.

"Nothing. I'm trying to think what this place was before?"

"The German commandant lived here."

Taking off his glasses he polished them with a piece of chamois, squinted blissfully, and having at last got the stud out, sighed with delicious relief.

"Not too cold for you?" he asked. "It is autumn, after all, the maple leaves are falling."

And he hummed the words of the song very softly: Falling maple leaves. . . .

"I'm terribly glad to see you," he said. "You're nasty to me as usual, but I love you, I do love you, honestly, Varya. In spite of your temper, in spite of your always being the cat that prowls alone, I love you. And you have never done me a good turn, you have never been decent to me. I've never even heard a kind word from you."

"What do you want my kind words for? What will they get you?"

"Now you're being beastly. What are you insinuating? That I'm the calculating type?"

Varya did not say anything. She delved into the pocket of her trousers, brought out a miniature manicure set and began filing her nails.

"Cute gadget, that," Yevgeny said. "A souvenir?"

She merely moved her shoulders for answer.

"You are a difficult person, really difficult, Varya dear," he said plaintively, shaking his head. "You might show some interest in the house at least. The trouble I had with it. And I'm not doing it for myself, you know, it's for our Dad. . . ."

"All the seven rooms? And attic?"

She glanced at her brother sideways, almost gaily. And he, as if he had won her forgiveness, rushed into speech, talking with that special candour, peculiar to clever and able schemers.

"Listen, my pet, it's too absurd. Dad is a Hero of the Soviet Union, he has retired, he's a Rear-Admiral, a figure, a veteran Party member. Can't the town provide him with a decent house? Are we that poor? Why, it's an ordinary bungalow, a hut, a shack. And mind you, the question about giving it to me has also been considered, it hung in the air actually. I have a family,

I'm an administrative worker, and Iraida is also going to get her degree soon. There's the child, too. And then you, an Admiral's daughter, you can't go gipsying with your geologists all your life. Don't you, Varvara Rodionovna Stepanova, don't you personally, you a comrade seriously wounded in the war, have a right to one good room, a nice, sunny room with a couple of windows facing south? Do you or do you not? Now take Granddad, the root of all the Stepanov stock, as Dad calls him. What about him? Where is he supposed to live? The poor old chap has suffered enough under the Germans, living on tree bark and whatnot, a tiller of the soil, an illiterate peasant, where is he supposed to live?"

"Did you put that in your application too?" Varya asked with a mocking smile.

As she listened to Yevgeny she turned to look again and again at the brown, freshly painted house, at the sunroom with the large windows which blazed orange and red in the rays of the setting sun, and at the window frames and shutters painted white and not yet dry.

"Naturally," Yevgeny said.

"And did you mention that this was once the House of Young Pioneers and School Children? I've remembered at last. I often came here, I remember watching a rehearsal of *Platon Krechet* here. Or maybe you didn't know?"

"Varya, I implore you," he began, but she cut him short.

"All right, you don't have to implore me, what has imploring got to do with it. But if father finds out—take care. And oh, Yevgeny my poppet, just think of the kick they'll give you out of the Party one of these days, oh my darling lamb, what a grand show it will be!"

She laughed, and stretching her little young body with relish, yawned.

"Only count me out," she said. "I'm not going to live here. I've got friends in town, and anyway our base is in Chorny Yar, not here. All this apart, I'm a bit 'disgusted, you don't mind, my poppet, do you. . . ."

With her soft, warm fingers she took hold of her brother's short, straight nose and pulled it playfully from side to side, then a bit harder, and then she pinched and tweaked it really hard. . . .

"Let go!" he twanged. "Let go, do you hear?"

Varya let go his nose, and wiped her fingers on her trousers.

"You're crazy, there're people watching, I'm not a nobody, they look up to me here," he said angrily. "After all, you must try to understand that I won't let anybody. . . ."

She listened to him for a long time with a patient, attentive expression.

"You'll die of a stroke," she observed. "You're a young man, but you've got a neck like a hog's. However, you can't rightly call it a neck. It's more like the fatty tail of a sheep."

"Oh, stop it!" he cried.

"How do characters like you happen at all?" she asked with a dreamy look. "You know, I've given it a lot of thought. And once when we had nothing to do, it had been pouring cats and dogs for days, I came across a book about birds. A very curious book."

Yevgeny was staring hard at the roof of his house and not listening.

"What's wrong?"

"I believe they have the brass to pinch nails right before my nose! They have just lowered a box to that character waiting below!" Yevgeny said indignantly, distending the nostrils of his short nose.

"And you pinched a whole house," Varya informed him with a giggle. "From under the nose of the gullible. Come on, listen. I'm telling you about yourself, so you ought to be interested. Try and concentrate, love. I want to tell you where tricky pieces like you come from."

"All right, tell me."

Laughing lightly, she told him about the cuckoo: every single little bird knows that the cuckoo is its sworn enemy, and so when this friend comes close they all attack it bravely, in a body. But while the birds are chasing the male, the female steals into someone else's nest and quickly lays an egg there, just one, and it looks like those already in the nest. The little cheat goes scouting before the deed and picks on a nest. She lays her egg in it and throws out one of those already there. "So the number remains the same, are you listening, Yevgeny?"

He nodded stolidly. But he was barely listening, so Varya prodded him in the ribs with her fist and told him to keep his mind on the story.

"Oh Lord! Why the devil did I bring you to see the house!" he sighed.

"Listen. The mother cuckoo lays her egg in the nest of tiny little birds, which naturally can't provide enough food for the whole crowd, their own young and the big, fat, greedy cuckoo chick like you. And so the young cuckoo does away with his foster brothers and sisters in order to preserve his species, that's what it says in the book. He chucks them out of the nest. He has a system of fighting for the preservation of his species, just as you have." Glinging lovingly to Yevgeny's fat, warm shoulder, she cooed: "I, too, am your half-sister, my poppet. And, oh how smartly you'd chuck me out if I were to hinder the development of your species!"

"Rot!"

"That's where you're wrong. Well then, when all the young of a different species have been chucked out, the dad and mum of the murdered chicks spend all their time feeding the young cuckoo. He has the whole nest to himself. And he doesn't give a damn for anyone!"

Suddenly Yevgeny smiled.

"A bad, a very bad bird, but a useful one," he said gaily. "It's a fact, Varya, I remember, and my memory is quite unique as you know. The cuckoo belongs to the useful birds because it devours a great number of hairy caterpillars, moths and forest pests, a great majority of which won't be eaten by sparrows and suchlike. Well, and the song-birds. . . ."

"What about the song-birds?" Varya asked sadly.

"They are not useful birds, you know."

"You take the prize. Aren't you a clever poppet!"

"Clever and shrewd," he said, kissing Varya on the forehead. "Nor am I mean. On the contrary, I'm rather big-hearted. To prove this, I'll tell you how I went to the station this morning to meet a certain. . . ."

He paused. Varya paled noticeably. He dragged out the pause for another minute. At last she could stand it no longer. "Tell me," she almost whispered, averting her face.

"Here goes. His wife is a raving beauty. The infant is sweetness itself. He looks thinner, there's some grey in his hair. He's dressed in his naval uniform, hasn't even got himself a civilian suit yet. He had on one of those black raincoats they wear, and a cap, only the emblem, or the crab or whatever it's called has been ripped off. He limps noticeably. Leans on a stick. Apparently he still can't do without a stick. To be perfectly honest, he's a cripple."

"You're lying," Varya said in a low, angry voice.

"I mean, psychologically everything is ideal. He's dying to work, not a word of self-pity from him, and to all intents and purposes he's a proper hero, he behaves as a real man should, but we know that it's a brave show. I'm a doctor, I can tell."

"And his hands?" Varya asked in the same low voice.

"According to him and also his lady he is able to operate. She is sweet, she's evidently what they call his guardian angel. She gazes into his eyes, hangs on his words, and is simply wrapped up in her Volodya. . . ."

Yevgeny, the big-hearted brother, was doing his best to pay Varya back for the cuckoo story. But she did not seem to notice.

"You've lost him, sister of mine," he said more cruelly. "You can't get him back now. Not from her, she's too lovely. A man is all right with a woman like that!"

"Has he received his appointment yet?" Varya asked, quite deaf to Yevgeny's remarks. "Have you appointed him somewhere?"

"No, he's wandering round the town. He will be tomorrow as well. He's got some ideas or other, and is looking for a place where he can put these ideas to work. But what have we? Only burnt down houses and ruins, that's all. . . ."

He kept his gaze fixed on Varya as he spoke.

"Oh, well," she said. "Good. Let's go, my cuckoo, it's really getting cold. . . ."

"Svetly" Good-Bye

Holding his hand to the gold-braided visor of his cap, Rear-Admiral Stepanov reviewed the ranks of the *Svetly* sailors for the last time. He walked with a strong, measured step, and a little behind him came the member of the Naval Council of War—a stout, elderly man, and the new Flotilla Commander, a tall, lean captain, whose face had become sunburnt to a dark red on the Black Sea.

It was very quiet, even the seagulls were strangely still. A cold wind whistled monotonously and somewhere on the shore, outside the seamen's club perhaps, a brass band was playing the old waltz "On the Hills of Manchuria". The distant sounds of the waltz wistful, yet holding a promise of something, could not have better suited the solemnly uplifted mood of the entire flotilla.

Rodion Stepanov's small, pale, hard eyes, even in these moments of parting, retained their usual expression—exacting and sternly questioning, as it were. He was not simply saying good-bye, he was also inspecting the crew; he was not just looking closely into the men's faces, he was examining them for the last time, and demanding from them without words, with his look alone, that all of them, old and young, remain the men he knew and loved. As a matter of fact, he never suspected that the feeling he had for his personnel—the pride he took in his sailors, his constant concern for them, his readiness to admire them, and his bitter disappointment when some warrant officer, petty officer or able seaman did something he ought not to have done—was, in fact, love, genuine love. . . .

As he walked past the men he was not aware that they, who had known him long, were noting a new, peculiar expression in his eyes, an expression of bitterness which he usually kept hidden, and which meant that he could hardly bear up. They knew that his usual look of sternness was something obligatory and habitual like an immaculate undercollar, or his dress uniform, gloves and dirk at the waist, things that were never essentials but merely features of his appearance.

Noticing their commander's pallor and the trembling of his hand raised in salute, the seamen and the petty officers stood even more erect and immobile, holding their breath, and trying to show if only in this small way that they were fully aware of the significance of what was happening. Some of the re-enlisted men had unshed tears in their eyes. They were ashamed, yet they could not help themselves, and Stepanov was afraid to meet their eyes because, though detesting any display of emotion, he was not at all sure that he would be able to keep a stiff upper lip himself till the end.

He found it hardest to look at Chief Petty Officer Gavrilentov. In the second year of the war, Gavrilentov, then an ordinary seaman, had been sent to a penal battalion. There he "atoned for his crime with blood" as they used to say. And then Stepanov, despite the opposition of some of the more cautious comrades, succeeded in getting Gavrilentov, a smart and clever electrician, back on the *Svetly*, which by this time had been named a Guards Ship. At first the sailors cold-shouldered Gavrilentov, and he, having suffered enough already from the many unfair penalties that had been imposed on him, was no model of tolerance, modesty and humility either. If someone said one word to him,

he flung back twelve, and he would have landed in trouble again, with no hope of coming back this time, if Stepanov had not intervened. Gavrilentov changed his ways promptly and for good after the talk he had had with Stepanov in his room. In the course of this conversation, he learnt to his amazement that the Commander knew all about him, that he'd had plenty of unpleasantness himself when Gavrilentov got into his first trouble, and that apart from everything else Stepanov had personally vouched for him when he returned, pledging his own good name as a guarantee. The upshot of this straight talk was that Gavrilentov ceased to feel wronged by the whole human race, fought excellently to the end of the war, and was then re-enlisted.

It was this Chief Petty Officer that Stepanov was approaching now, conscious of the man's intent, unswerving and reproachful look. "Man, your memory is slipping," Stepanov said angrily to himself. "You promised to have a talk with him, and you haven't done it yet." And, in the way he had, he jotted it down in his mind: Call CPO Gavrilentov to my cabin after the show is over.

He said good-bye to the personnel of his *Svetly*, presented the new Flotilla Commander to the Flotilla Staff Officers, and then listened, with a studious expression on his face, to the speech made by the member of the Naval Council of War, who glancing at his notes every now and again, enumerated in a rather hollow voice, without the customary pathos, Stepanov's services to the Navy at different times.

"Sounds like an obituary," Stepanov thought. "He might be speaking at a funeral. It's a routine matter to him, no doubt. . . ."

Stepanov's services were many, they were all listed, but most probably it was someone else who had made out the list on Dudyrin's instructions, because his reading was far from fluent, the writing stumped him again and again, and he relapsed into long silences, moving his lips soundlessly and wrinkling his brow in annoyance.

"Comrade Stepanov, Rodion Mefodyevich, born into a poor peasant's family, was recruited into the tsar's Navy as a youngster, and served as a rating. He began his service on the legendary cruiser *Aurora*. . . ."

"It's only the beginning," Stepanov sighed. "Now we'll hear a dirge about my giving all my strength to the building of the Navy."

He found it unbearably dull and stuffy in the crowded dining saloon where the officers of the division were packed like sar-

dines, and regretted the passing of the solemn and exalted mood which had accompanied his leave-taking of the ship's personnel. He very much wanted to wink at Colonel Bakunina who was dabbling at her eyes with a handkerchief as if this were indeed a funeral. "Amazing," he thought. "It's such a crashing bore, and the old lady's moved to tears. You never know about speeches."

He tried to listen to the speaker again, and thought: "Could my life have been as drearily industrious and virtuous as Dudyryn makes out?" The obituaries were maddening, but he supposed it was done, with all those "groups of comrades" speaking in memoriam of human frailties, anxieties, wars, joys and love. "Don't forget about CPO Gavrilentov," he reminded himself sternly, once more, and began to study the new Flotilla Commander who stood listening with an expression of attentive boredom on his face. "He'll do. He's a wholly dependable sort. He keeps his mouth shut, he showed sound knowledge when he took over the ships, he fought well in the war, and he's got brains." And he began to recall that landing operation on the Black Sea which had impressed him by the sweep and boldness of the plan and, what was more, by the efficiency with which it was carried out. And the more he thought of that operation, conducted by the new Flotilla Commander, the easier he felt in his mind for his division.

"What a speaker!" he marvelled at Dudyryn again. "I wouldn't be at all surprised if he called me the deceased by mistake."

Behind him someone sniffled, he looked over his shoulder and saw Sharipov who, looking absolutely melted, was wiping his sweating face with a handkerchief rolled into a ball, and sighing for all the room to hear. And Bakunina was still weeping. "Maybe I really have died? No, you haven't. No fear! Chin up, Rodion it won't be long now!" he told himself.

And, in fact, it was not long.

Dudyryn fell silent abruptly, and all those present turned to look at Stepanov. Apparently, he was also expected to make a speech. But he did not. He was no good at it, and disliked the occasional necessity. After a moment's pause he stood at attention and, looking straight into the new Flotilla Commander's eyes, articulating every syllable clearly in a voice that was not loud yet strong and firm, pronounced the words he loved, the phrase which seemed to answer this and many other occasions perfectly. And maybe because he was putting his very soul into this Manual of Arms response, everyone there was impressed.

"I serve the Soviet Union!" said Rear-Admiral Stepanov, Hero of the Soviet Union, their own Fotilla Commander. And everyone realised that no more words should be spoken by anyone.

Nor should there be any good-byes.

Inclining his grey head slightly and holding the dirk at his side, he walked out of the dining saloon, followed by Sharipov. The new Commander's big leather suitcase had been tactfully placed in the passage outside Stepanov's room, and not carried inside. His own bags stood ready and waiting for him just inside the door.

"Call CPO Gavrilenko to me," he gave the order without looking at Sharipov. "Quick."

"Aye, aye, sir!"

Sharipov shot out of the room. And immediately the order came over the loudspeakers: "CPO Gavrilenko to go to the Rear-Admiral's room."

Stepanov knew the voice of the announcer—it was WO Stradomsky, a great lover of poetry, dancing and sightseeing trips. He now repeated the order in a sterner tone: "CPO Gavrilenko. . ."

The Arctic wind whistled serenely and steadily. The slanting rays of the sun coming through the porthole fell on the desk at which Stepanov had worked for so many years, and lighted up the arm-rest of the chair in which another man would now sit. "Well, that's all," he thought, blinking and screwing up his eyes. "You've got your honourable discharge. You're retired now, Comrade Stepanov, you're on pension."

Tomorrow they would begin manoeuvres, but he would already be on his train—pensioner Stepanov. His breath caught for a second, but only for a second: he was able to control his emotion now, he had got himself used to the idea of retiring, he had trained his mind to it. They had taught him to do it at the hospital, only there they had called it kinosiatics. He had taken a course like that, preparatory to retiring. . . .

There was a knock, and he called out: "Come in."

CPO Gavrilenko reported smartly.

Stepanov nodded, and neither sitting down himself nor offering Gavrilenko a chair said: "Before I go, I want to remind you of what happened in December 1942. . . ."

Gavrilenko looked away. His bony face with the small white scar on the chin grew tense.

"I want to do more than simply remind you," Stepanov continued severely. "You remember it well enough without me re-

minding you. I want you to forget it! Forget it for ever and ever. One can have a grievance against people, but against one's country—never! We have never had another talk about it since that time, but I'm afraid you are still brooding on your wrongs. We are probably parting for ever, so take this as an order from me: chuck it out of your heart and mind. This is my last order to you. Is everything clear?"

"Aye, aye, sir!" Gavrilentkov's voice rang with joyful amazement.

He looked at Stepanov from under his brows, but his expression was so frank, so ardent and devoted, that the conversation could not have gone on. And Stepanov put an end to it before it could develop into what he called "maudlin melodramatics."

"You may go," he said, turning away intentionally, and went to look out of the porthole.

Gavrilentkov left.

Well, that was that. There was nothing else to do. And still, prepared though he was for this moment, it was pretty rough. He had borne up splendidly during the handing over of the flotilla to its new commander, he had said good-bye to the personnel of his ships almost calmly. It had not been hard in the dining saloon at all, far from it, he had even amused himself there. But leaving the *Svetly* was harder than he thought. . . .

His bags had already been carried down to the launch. Shari-pov had been told to place the new Commander's suitcase on a chair in the stateroom, old Dr. Bakunina had already been and gone, red-eyed from weeping, to give him her final instructions—but still he lingered. . . .

At last he went.

His sailors stood in a solid wall all along his route, he knew it would be like that, and it was precisely this he dreaded. They stood silent and sad, making way for him, squeezing closer together to let him pass. And only every now and again he caught a whisper:

"Have a good holiday, Comrade Rear-Admiral. . . ."

"Trust in justice, Comrade Rear-Admiral. . . ."

"Come and see us. . . ."

"Don't push, fellows. . . ."

"Live till a hundred. . . ."

"Everything will be all right, Comrade Commander. . . ."

"We'll write to you. . . ."

"Send us a postcard. . . ."

"Don't crush, Lukashin. . . ."

"Good luck!"

"Happy landings!"

He walked, clenching his teeth tight, screwing up his eyes, and breathing heavily. He seemed to be in a temper. But it wasn't that. It was the parting. A current of hot air came from somewhere, and he thought: "The last time." His hand accidentally touched a sailor's strong, solid shoulder, and again he thought: "The last time." A young gunner, losing his footing in the crush and falling, made the sailors roar with laughter, and once more he thought: "The last time."

But the real ordeal was ahead: he had to say good-bye to his ship. Everyone realised what a wrench it would be, and that's why Dr. Bakunina was there, to be on hand in case. . . .

He saluted and then walked to the flag of the Guards Ship. He went down on one knee, grunting like an old man. The wind was whipping the flag and he could not immediately catch hold of the cloth, pierced with machine-gun fire, wounded with shrapnel. . . He paused for a moment before pulling the flag towards him and touching it with his lips. . . . Nor, lost in thought, did he rise at once. . . .

He drew a heavy sigh, and raising his hand to the vizor of his cap went down to the launch. He did not look back at his flotilla, at his ships whence hundreds of eyes were watching the launch moving away. . . .

Commanders and officers of other naval units were awaiting him on the pier. There were submarine officers, there was Martiryants who commanded a battleship, and Turov who commanded a destroyer, and General Kostromichev, Commander of the Navy's Airborne Troops, the very same Kostromichev, now completely grey, whom Stepanov remembered as a small, skinny, fidgety youngster piloting a Sopwith in the Civil War. The sun had not yet set, and all the gold of the epaulets and the sleeve chevrons, the stars of Heroes, the orders, the polished buttons and the braid on the generals' and admirals' caps shone brightly in its parting rays. A gentle wind blew in from the sea, as though to remind Stepanov of his flotilla. Everyone crowded round him, speaking with emphatic good cheer and even joking about it being a crying shame to retire at his age when he was just ripe enough to marry and start a family. Vedernikov, the motor torpedo-boat commander, had been trying to tell them a joke about a certain old man, and now after several vain attempts

he had really got going, but Stepanov's attention was called away by Sharipov, pushing his way through to him. "Your old man is waiting for you near the control post, Comrade Rear-Admiral," Sharipov told him.

"What old man?" Stepanov was puzzled.

"Why, your old man, Comrade Rear-Admiral, your father. He daren't come close. He's over there, around that corner, having a snack. . . ."

He excused himself and quickly followed Sharipov. And there, sitting on a packing case behind some empty barrels stacked close to the wall, was old Mefody in his ancient tarpaulin raincoat, eating small fish out of a tin, very adroitly lifting them out with his penknife. On an old newspaper beside him were two thick slices of bread, a big, pealed onion, and some salt in an old shoe polish tin.

"Why, dad!" Rodion cried delightedly. "What are you doing here? Why didn't you tell them, they would have semaphored the ship. . . ."

The old man blinked in surprise, folded his knife, put the unfinished tin down on the packing case, brushed the bread-crumbs off his beard with his hand, wiped his hand on the raincoat afterwards, and then kissed his son three times.

"It's that damnable codfish that played me foul. You sailors have such good fish, and I, the old fool, went and bought a lot in a bag of matting. I wanted to leave it in the baggage room, but they wouldn't take it, they say they've rats there. And anyway it's for the best, because rats or no rats, someone might have pinched half the fish, I wouldn't put it past them. . . ."

And he went on to tell Rodion his long-winded story about the sailor boys, God bless them and keep them in good health, who let him sit there, and about his not telling them that he was the Admiral's father and merely mentioning that he was a relative, for he wasn't one to babble. The bag of fish, now, it was right there, it could come into the train compartment with them very nicely. . . .

"Let's go," Rodion said sternly.

"Why should I go anywhere?" the old man balked. "I'm not going anywhere."

"Yes you are," Rodion said more sternly still.

"But there's more left in the tin," old Mefody wailed, trying to twist free of his son's grip on his arm. "There's more left in the tin, and there's the bread too. . . ."

But Rodion got his own way: he was the wrong man to argue with. Old Mefody, taking quick, wary looks at his Rear-Admiral son, at his uniform, his bars of decorations, and his dirk, emerged from his shelter, and all the people gathered there to see Stepanov off were struck by his likeness to his father. They saw at once that he was bone of the bone, flesh of the flesh of this Russian peasant, this tiller of the soil, this man of toil. And all who were there—the celebrated generals, pilots and seamen, all drew up to attention as if it were the Minister of Defence himself coming towards them, and the eyes of all of them lighted up with pride in their people. They were proud to be the sons of workers and peasants. They were proud of the fact that they, who had been workers and peasants in their own youth, had through hard work, enormous effort and feat of arms, earned the right to be commanding officers in the army of the working people.

"My father, Mefody Yeliseyevich Stepanov," Rodion presented him in the same stern voice.

Blinking nervously, the old man gave a strong handshake to every one of the dazzling officers in turn, saying: "Stepanov, Stepanov, Stepanov. . . ."

When he had shaken hands all round, he saluted in the old way, and said: "I came to meet Rodion Mefodyevich, you see. My son, you see. . . ."

He stepped a little to the side to see which car the two hefty sailors were putting his bag of fish into. The cars were so many that he began to worry, and tugged at his son's arm, saying: "Look, Rodion Mefodyevich, tell your sailors to mind the fish. They've shoved the bag into a car, and now try to guess which one. . . ."

"What's the big idea, calling me Rodion Mefodyevich?" he asked.

"What am I to call you—Roddy boy?" his father said, waving his hand vexedly.

It annoyed him that his son had forced him to leave a good half-tin of food uneaten, and that the sailors were all alike, all brawny and moon-faced, so he'd never be able to guess which one of them had handled the bag of fish.

"Listen, sailor," he said, moving closer to Sharipov and whispering in his ear. "Do me a kindness, see about that fish, I don't want it to get lost. I may be old, but my eyes are sharp, I'll see quickly enough if something's not just so. . . . It's choice fish,

the best, I picked it out myself, it's for your Admiral, the doctors have told him to eat plenty of fresh fish, vegetables, everything special."

"Aye, aye, sir," Sharipov answered smartly, without a smile. "We'll be vigilant, you can rely on me entirely."

"That's the way," old Mefody agreed. He liked the sound of the word vigilant, and felt he could trust him.

My Dear One!

She had lain awake almost the whole night through. She lay quite still, her flaming cheek propped up on a fist, staring at the dark window outside which the dreary autumn rain poured and poured with the same monotonous sound.

She lay thus, thinking, remembering, forbidding herself to remember and remembering again, loving these memories and despising herself because she could not help remembering.

"He's a stranger to me," she told herself. "He's got nothing to do with me, he's by himself, his inner world, his feelings, his family have nothing to do with me. I'll never be able to be simply a pal, a good friend, a comrade to him, I'd never stand an hour of such torture, and so I must not deceive myself and try to sort of renew our acquaintance. I love him, I loved him as a school-girl, I loved him all through the war, I love him now, terribly, unbearably, and so I must pack up and leave at once, and try to keep away from here, to come nowhere near him, it's no good to me or to him, and, after all, have I a right to anything?"

But thinking this she knew that she would not and could not leave without seeing him, if only from a distance.

And again, almost in tears she asked herself angrily: "What for? What for? Why go through all that torture?"

Her mind was working feverishly: where and how could she see him so he wouldn't notice her, so it wouldn't irritate or sadden him. Her humble wish to see him without his knowing it did not seem degrading to her at all—her love was above counting grievances, worrying about self-respect and wounded vanity. He had always been her all, he meant more to her than her own self. Her personality had become part of his, and one didn't hold a grievance against oneself, did one? Wasn't it silly to show off before oneself? And didn't he know that she loved him and would love him always, hadn't she told him so? Well then, the main thing was not to cause him pain, not to place him in a false

and difficult position, not to disturb the balance he had regained after nearly being deprived of his purpose in life, his work, and not to outrage his sense of decency in regard to his family, his wife and child. . . .

She struck a match and looked at her watch: five o'clock. Father and Granddad would be arriving at two in the afternoon. Daddy would naturally want to see Volodya, but she had no right to be with them because her presence might make things difficult for Volodya. All she had a right to was a few hours with her father, and then she would have to go back to Chorny Yar. When she was gone they could see each other as much and as often as they liked. . . .

She gave a small whimper, feeling left out in the cold and jealous of Volodya's affection for her father, but the absurdity of it sobered her at once, and calling herself an idiot, she began to plan how to catch a glimpse of Volodya before the arrival of the two o'clock train from Moscow. One minute she shivered, huddling in her blanket, and the next felt so hot that she'd kick angrily with her strong legs and push the blanket and the old fur jacket, Iraida had lent her, to the foot of the sofa. And then, suddenly, she would feel suffocated, as if she were sitting in front of an open furnace, and she would get up, open the window wide, and breathe the dampness of the rainy night until she got chilled to the bone. And all the time she was making and discarding plans, one sillier and more fantastic than the next. . . .

Yevgeny was snoring rhythmically, with arrogant self-satisfaction, in the room next door; a clock in an oakwood case that looked like a child's coffin ticked loudly on the wall between; Yurka, the youngest of the Stepanovs, was threatening someone in his sleep: "I'll shoot them all!"; Iraida got up to give him a drink of water; and Yevgeny suddenly stopped snoring to snap at her in a nasty, fat voice: "Can't I have a bit of quiet in the night, at least?"

Just before daybreak, when the rain-streaked window could be distinguished against the darkness of the room, she suddenly knew what to do. She remained sitting on the edge of the sofa for a minute or two, shivering in her long nightgown, then tossed her head, gave a shy and happy laugh, and whispered as an incantation: "I'll see him, I'll see him, I'll see him!"

And though she knew for certain that he would not see her she dressed with care, putting on the best and prettiest things

she had. Opening her battered suitcase, she took out her extra special blouse, a frilly white one. Next, she got out a little suit she had, patent leather pumps, a checked head scarf, and a pair of brand new stockings bought at a crazy price. . . .

Standing in a tub in the kitchen, she poured a pail of cold water over herself, hissing at herself all the time to be quiet, and then, wearing her extra special slip, a pale blue one edged with lace, she combed her hair, glancing briefly into the mirror, made two plaits and twisted them into a knot at the back of her neck. Her round eyes, slightly turned up nose with the tip still peeling a little from sunburn, her apple-firm cheeks and her quivering lips made such a depressing sight, that she poked her finger at the mirror and, forgetting that she should keep quiet in her brother's house, said in that carrying voice in which she used to shout "Fall in!" to her soldiers during the war: "Face! Call that a face?"

"What's up?" Yevgeny cried out in alarm. He had a maniacal fear of burglars. "What is it? What's wrong?"

"Burglars!" Varya called back, matching the alarm in his voice. "Help! Burglars! Hurry!"

The door opened a crack, and Yevgeny, without his glasses, squinted short-sightedly into the room.

"You and your silly jokes," he grumbled sleepily. And then asked: "The train is due at 14.00. You haven't forgotten, I hope?"

It was exactly six when Varya left the house in her green rain-coat, checked scarf with the ends tied under her chin, and her extra special patent leather pumps. The rain poured unabated. It was about a forty minute walk to the railway station along a road, that had become pitted with shell-holes and craters in those last battles before the town was liberated. By the time she found a taxi, a captured German DKW, and climbed in, her shoes were a complete sodden mess.

"Where to?" the driver, who had a day's growth of beard on his face, asked surlily.

"Relax," Varya told him in her military voice. "Before we go any further I want you to answer one question. . . ."

Sitting sideways on the seat, she pulled off her wet stockings, wrung out the hem of her skirt, and sighed: it was so painfully clear that her extra special pumps might as well go into the dustbin now.

"Are we going to sit around much longer?" the driver asked.

"Oh yes, I wanted to ask you: how much do you make a day, at most? Only honestly, no fleecing."

"Honestly and no fleecing," the driver repeated. He thought it over. "Up to a thousand or thereabouts."

"How much up to? Five hundred, six hundred?"

"A young lady with something up her sleeve," he said, lighting a cigarette. "You're not from the militia, by any chance?"

"What's the difference? I'll need you until one o'clock. Maybe we'll be moving, maybe we'll be parking, I'll pay you a lump sum so you won't lose out. See?"

"Do we switch on the meter? Do you want a receipt?" the driver asked, talking business now.

"I don't know about those things."

"Do we make out of town trips?"

"I don't know about that either."

"O. K. If it's a lump sum—seven hundred."

"It's not highway robbery, is it?" Varya asked.

"You make me laugh. Don't you know the price of bread?"

"All right," Varya said, ignoring his remark. "Drive to 23 Lenin Street, that's next door to the bank. We'll wait there."

The car began to jog along the ruts of Ovrazhki towards the business section of the town. Repairs were already under way here. Tramway lines were being laid, the right side of the street was closed to traffic and there tip-up trucks, chugging and rumbling loudly, were busy unloading macadam, and going for more. It was quite light now. The sky was grey and lowering, and the rain still poured down. The old birches on Gornaya Street had already shed their leaves.

When they had parked in front of the bank, Varya climbed over to sit beside the driver. And now she could plainly see the ugly scar on his chin.

"Were you a soldier?" she asked him.

"Weren't we all," he answered sullenly.

"Where did they patch you up so lousily?"

"Why? Are you a doctor or something?"

"No, I'm not. But I know a wonderful doctor, the best in the world."

* The driver gave her a surprised glance. He thought he heard tears in her voice.

"He'd do anything for a soldier," she went on. "Nothing would be too much trouble for him. He's the only one like that. . . ."

She blew her nose into the corner of her scarf, wiped her tear-wet face with the palms of her small hands, and relapsed into silence. The driver dozed off, quickly and expertly. He woke up with a start when his curious fare began to pummel him viciously with her fists.

"Hurry, hurry, hur-ry!" she was saying. "There he goes, there—with the stick! That tall man in the black raincoat, it's a naval raincoat, see? And no hat. . . ."

Her face had turned so white that the driver felt afraid.

"Only none of your tricks," he said, his voice groggy from sleep. "It does happen, they throw acid into a bloke's face, and you're in for no end of trouble."

"Idiot!" Varya said without offence. "Faster, or we'll lose him!"

Her lips were trembling, her eyes were full of tears. She wiped them with an angry gesture, all but pressed her face to the windshield, and spoke in such an extraordinary, such a heart-rending voice, that the driver braked abruptly. She said: "If we lose him, I'll die. Truly."

"He won't get away," he said, accelerating again. "We'll catch him, never you worry!"

"I only want to look, only to look," she said rapidly, pressing her face closer and closer to the rain-blurred glass. "I only want to see him, you understand?"

Volodya was walking quickly, he leaned on his stick but his stride was broad and free. There was nothing pathetic about his walk: this was a strong and healthy man who had suffered a little in the war. The wind fluttered his dark, wavy hair, the slanting rain struck at his back, and soon the rain-soaked shoulders of his black raincoat began to look a darker black. Varya could not see his face, but it did not worry her. . . .

He was there, almost with her, he was there, her Volodya, her anguish and her happiness, he was alive, real, so much her own and so remote. . . .

Squeezing her throat with her hands to suppress a scream of happiness and pain, panting and almost choking, she repeated as in a trance:

"Only don't lose him, driver, dear, darling driver, don't lose him. I know, he's going to the old oncological clinic, to the medical institute, that way there, please don't lose him, for mercy's sake don't lose him. . . ."

"I'll run over the skunk!" the driver suddenly flew into a rage. "The hobbling bastard, and what a girl to wrong, too!"

"No, no!" she cried in a loud, happy voice. "He's wonderful! It's me, it's all my doing. I'm a bitch. A rotten, sorry thing. It's me you should run over, me!"

"Why you? What have you done?"

But Varya did not answer.

Volodya had stopped in front of what was once the oncological institute and was now a pile of blasted ruins, bristling with twisted, rusty iron bars.

"And now drive past him to that telegraph pole over there," she said softly, as if afraid that Volodya might overhear. "We'll park there. See the place I mean?"

The driver changed gears and stepped on the gas. Creaking and groaning, the car went slowly down the incline into the hollow and, roaring, climbed out again, emerging beside the telegraph pole. Cautiously, Varya opened the door a little way. She could see Volodya's face now—wet with rain, the cheekbones jutting sharply, the eyebrows thick and dark. It was amazing: he stood in front of those ruins as though not seeing them, as if he were viewing not ugly, sombre ruins, but a huge stretch of level ground stacked with excellent building materials with which to erect a new and splendid hospital, pure and magnificent, as essential to people as bread, water, sunlight and love.

He was one of life's builders, he who stood there leaning on his stick in the dreary, pouring rain. For him there was no rain, no ruins, no tiring—nothing but the cause he served.

"Oh, my dear one," Varya said, softly and happily, crying and no longer wiping her tears. "My dear one, my dear, my only one!"

TO THE READER

Progress Publishers would be glad to have your opinion of this book, its translation and design and any suggestions you may have for future publications.

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